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HISTORY of WAR

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Discover how Combined Operations used subterfuge and sabotage to strike back at Hitler

REAL HACKSAW RIDGE

Read the true story of Desmond Doss' Medal of Honor at Okinawa

SPETSNAZ vs AFGHANS

How the Soviets met their match against US-backed guerrilla resistance

VIKING INVASION

Maldon: the battle that sealed England's fate

ISSUE 091

KING & COUNTRY
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Daring commando raids on the Norwegian coastline during World War II changed the face of modern warfare

© Getty

Welcome

In 1941, Britain and her allies began launching a series of special operations along the Norwegian coast, with the aim of disrupting and destroying any resources or facilities being used to fuel the Nazi war economy. These hit-and-run raids were carried out by commando units: small groups of tough and highly skilled infantry trained to strike fast and hard. The success of these operations forced Hitler to divert men and resources to defend the huge Norwegian coastline. The experiences of the commandos set the blueprint for commando units around the world and modern-day special forces.

Tim Williamson
Editor-in-Chief

CONTRIBUTORS

TOM GARNER

Mervyn Kersh, a British-Jewish veteran, spoke with Tom this issue – he recalls landing on D-Day, fighting across Europe and witnessing the horrors of Bergen-Belsen. He also discusses the great need to remember and learn from the war.

GAVIN MORTIMER

Gavin is a best-selling writer, historian and an expert in special forces units during the Second World War. Over on page 24 he shares the story of the first commando raids against Nazi-occupied Norway.

HARETH AL BUSTANI

An army medic, devout Christian and pacifist, Desmond Doss remains one of the most unique recipients of the Medal of Honor and the inspiration for the film *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016). Hareth recalls his real story on page 60.

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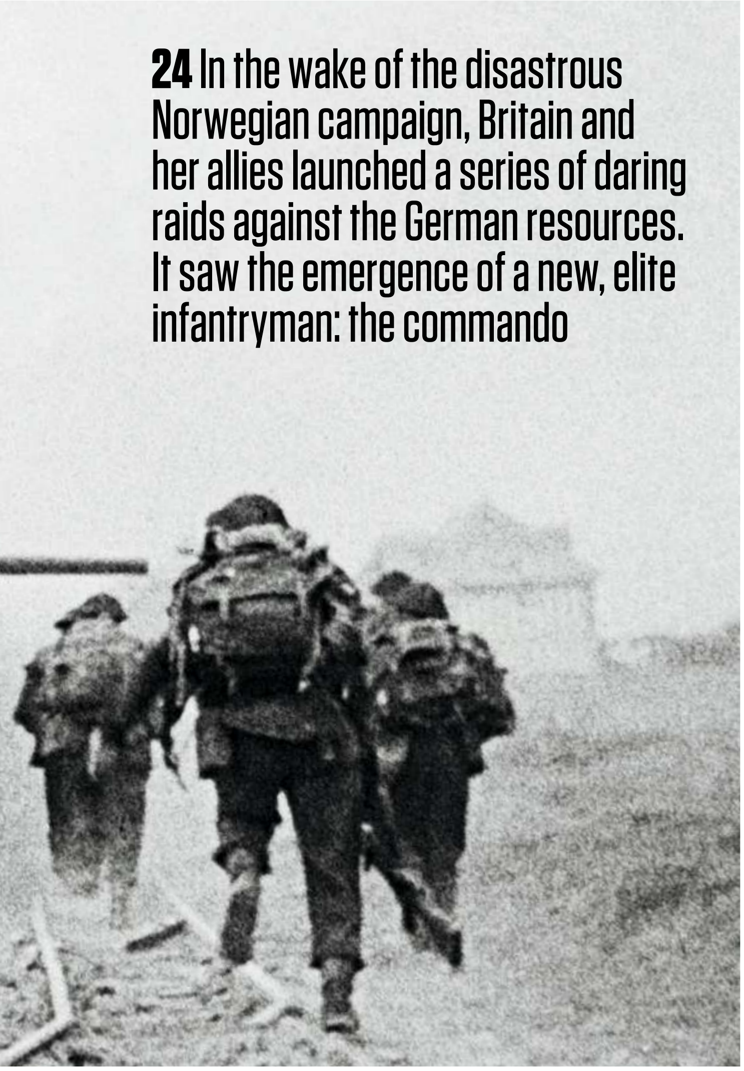

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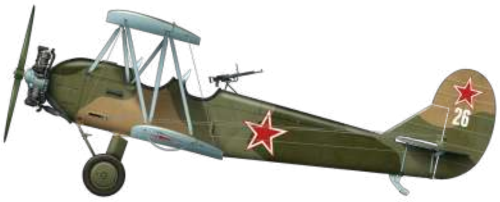

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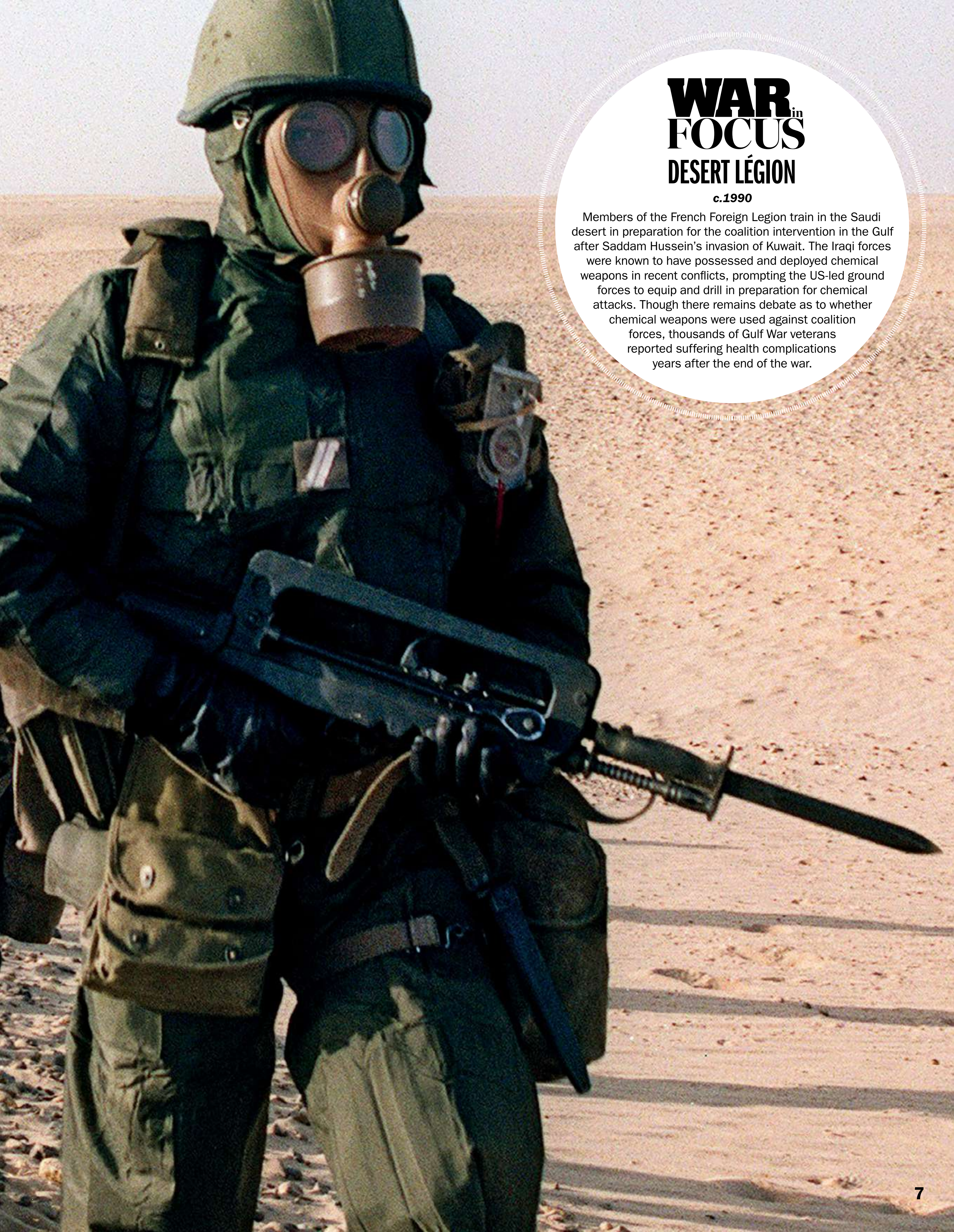
This light, antiquated biplane became one of the most iconic aircraft of the Soviet Union, made famous by the Night Witches

© Getty



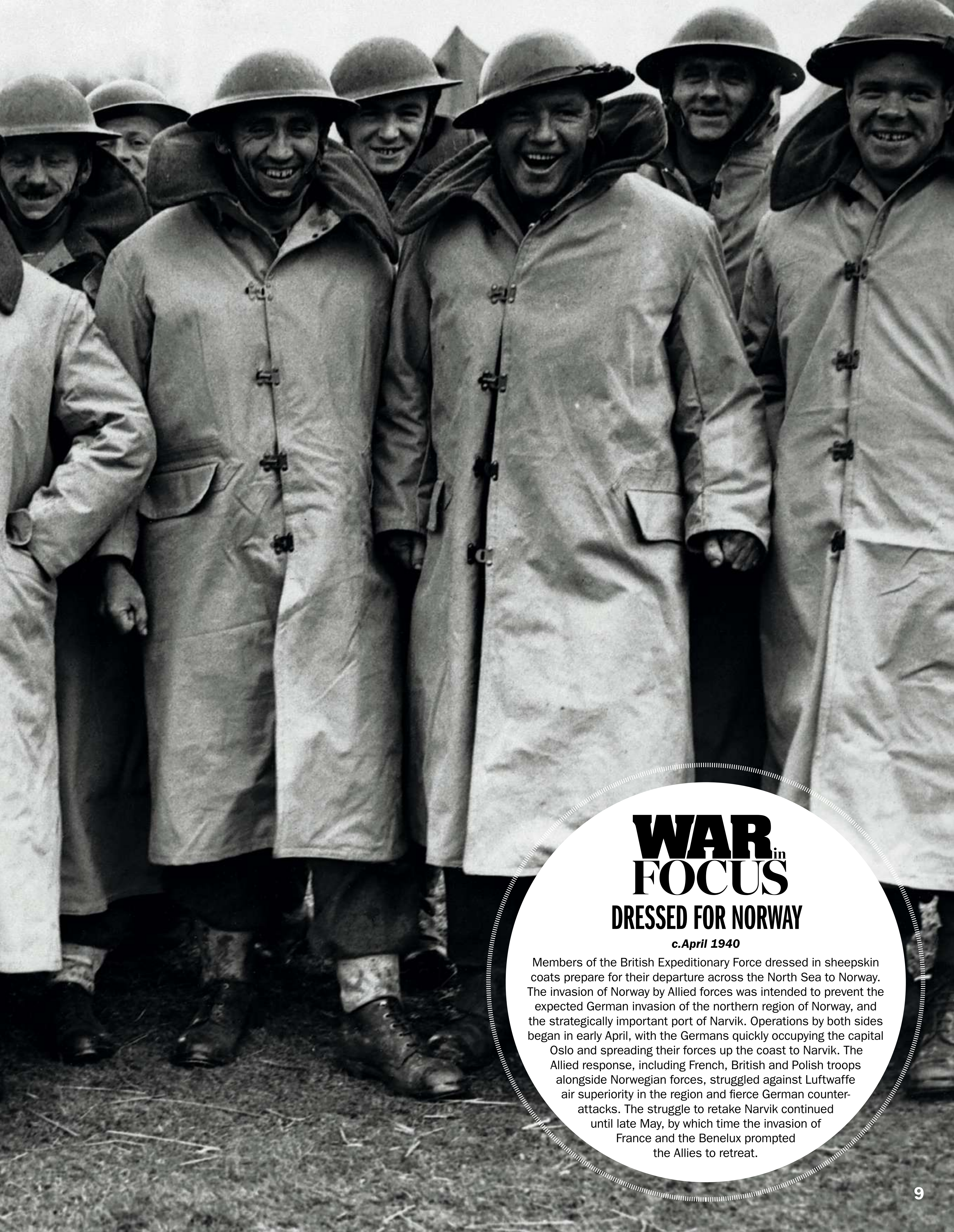
WAR in FOCUS

DESERT LÉGION

c.1990

Members of the French Foreign Legion train in the Saudi desert in preparation for the coalition intervention in the Gulf after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The Iraqi forces were known to have possessed and deployed chemical weapons in recent conflicts, prompting the US-led ground forces to equip and drill in preparation for chemical attacks. Though there remains debate as to whether chemical weapons were used against coalition forces, thousands of Gulf War veterans reported suffering health complications years after the end of the war.

© Getty

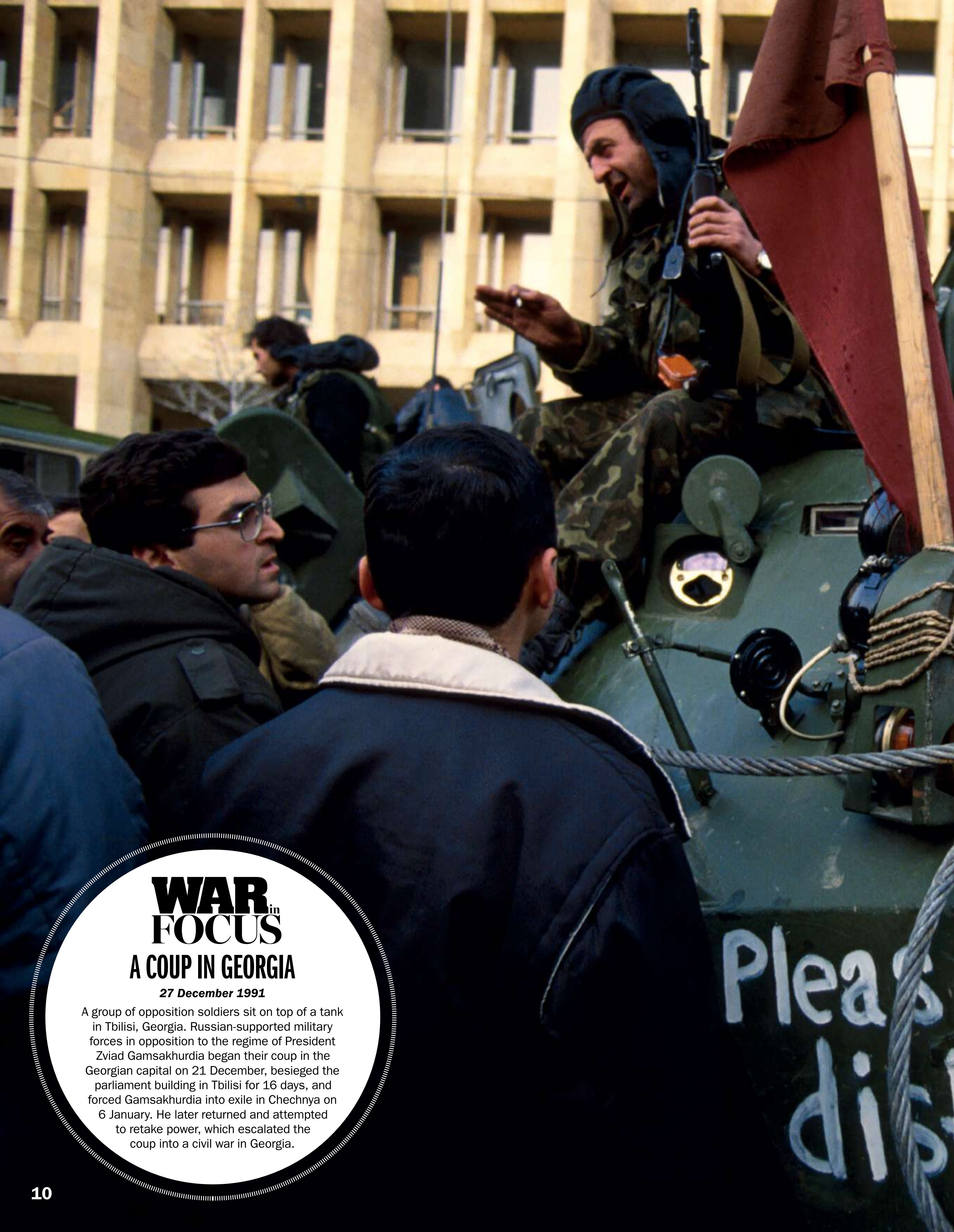


WAR in FOCUS

DRESSED FOR NORWAY

c.April 1940

Members of the British Expeditionary Force dressed in sheepskin coats prepare for their departure across the North Sea to Norway. The invasion of Norway by Allied forces was intended to prevent the expected German invasion of the northern region of Norway, and the strategically important port of Narvik. Operations by both sides began in early April, with the Germans quickly occupying the capital Oslo and spreading their forces up the coast to Narvik. The Allied response, including French, British and Polish troops alongside Norwegian forces, struggled against Luftwaffe air superiority in the region and fierce German counter-attacks. The struggle to retake Narvik continued until late May, by which time the invasion of France and the Benelux prompted the Allies to retreat.



WAR in FOCUS

A COUP IN GEORGIA

27 December 1991

A group of opposition soldiers sit on top of a tank in Tbilisi, Georgia. Russian-supported military forces in opposition to the regime of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia began their coup in the Georgian capital on 21 December, besieged the parliament building in Tbilisi for 16 days, and forced Gamsakhurdia into exile in Chechnya on 6 January. He later returned and attempted to retake power, which escalated the coup into a civil war in Georgia.

e pardon the
turbance

© Getty

A group of mujahideen fighters oppose the Red Army, April 1979

© Getty

TIMELINE OF THE...

SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR

The USSR's brutal occupation of Afghanistan tears the country apart and plays a major role in the eventual downfall of the Soviet Union

27-28 April 1978

SAUR REVOLUTION

The Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) launches a coup d'etat against the First Republic of Afghanistan. Afghan President Mohammad Daoud Khan and his family are killed and the socialist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) is established.

© Alamy

DRA Afghan soldiers ride a Soviet-produced T-62 tank during a military parade to mark the tenth anniversary of the Saur Revolution, April 1988

1978-79

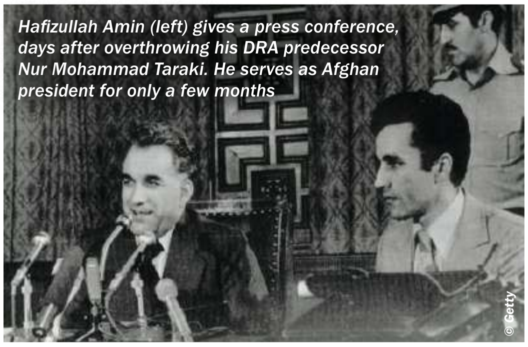
MUJAHIDEEN REBELLION

Unrest grows against the DRA, who kill thousands of political prisoners and fight among themselves. A loose collection of Afghan opposition groups (known as the mujahideen) rebel, which causes the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to deploy the 40th Army to Afghanistan.

27 December 1979

OPERATION STORM-333 ①

Soviet special forces (Spetsnaz) begin the Soviet-Afghan War by storming the Tajbeg Palace in Kabul and assassinating the DRA leader Hafizullah Amin. A new pro-Soviet DRA government is installed and Kabul is occupied.



Hafizullah Amin (left) gives a press conference, days after overthrowing his DRA predecessor Nur Mohammad Taraki. He serves as Afghan president for only a few months

© Getty

December 1979-February 1980

SOVIET OCCUPATION

The Soviet Union occupies Afghanistan by entering the country along two ground routes and an air corridor. The invasion exacerbates Afghan nationalist sentiment, while the Red Army finds itself quashing uprisings at the request of the new DRA government.

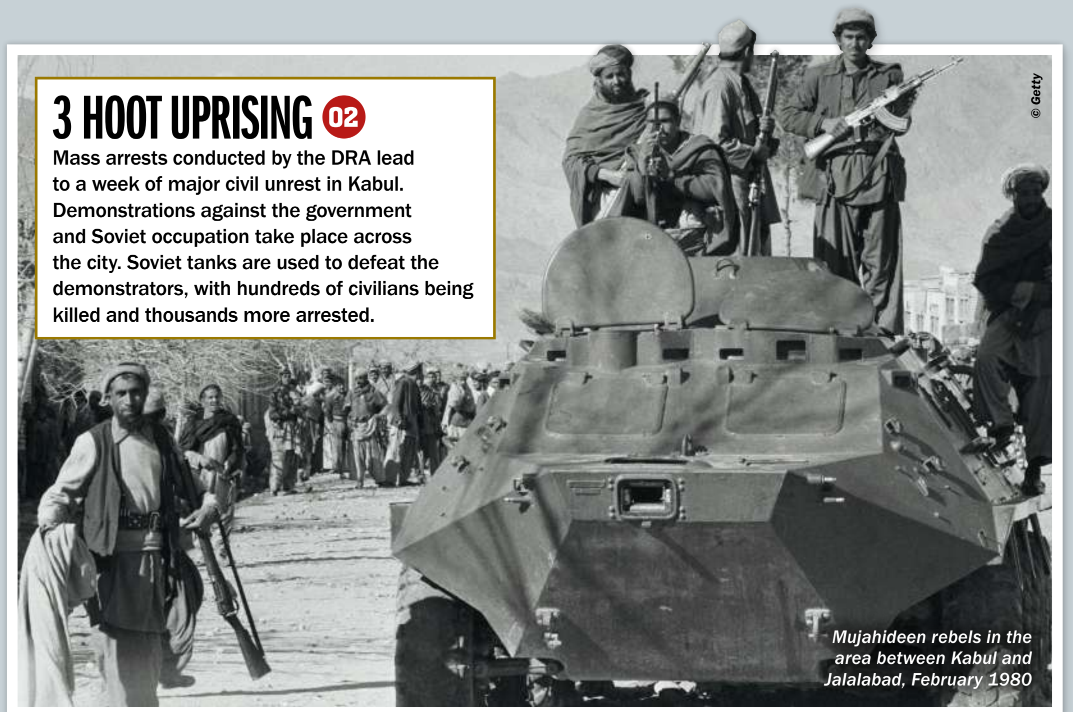
Soviet soldiers pictured in Kabul, c.1980

© Getty

February 1980

3 HOOT UPRISING 02

Mass arrests conducted by the DRA lead to a week of major civil unrest in Kabul. Demonstrations against the government and Soviet occupation take place across the city. Soviet tanks are used to defeat the demonstrators, with hundreds of civilians being killed and thousands more arrested.



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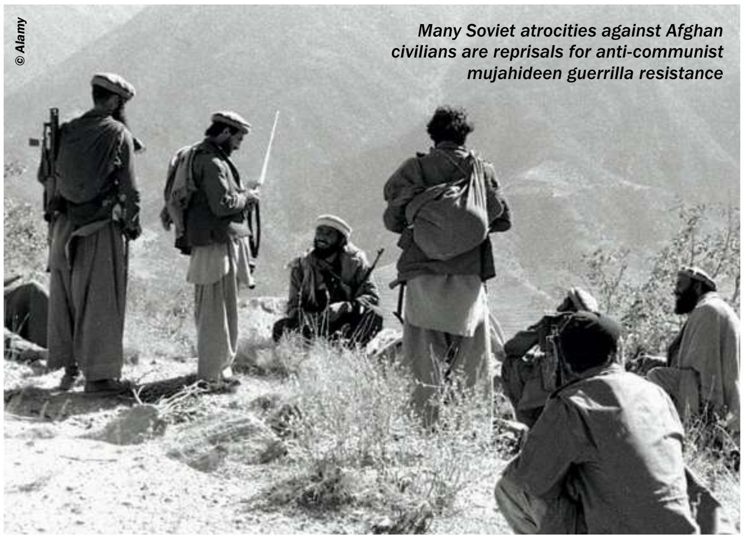
Mujahideen rebels in the area between Kabul and Jalalabad, February 1980

1980-89

WAR CRIMES

Some historians believe that the Soviet Union is guilty of committing genocide in Afghanistan. Perhaps as many as two million Afghans are killed by the Soviets or the DAR, with violence and rape being commonplace. Massacres of hundreds of civilians also occur, including at Padkhwab-e Shana and in Laghman Province.



© Alamy

Many Soviet atrocities against Afghan civilians are reprisals for anti-communist mujahideen guerrilla resistance

1979-89

OPERATION CYCLONE

The CIA leads a programme to arm and finance the mujahideen against Soviet forces and the DRA. Funding and supplies largely go to militant Islamic groups that are favoured by neighbouring Pakistan. Cyclone becomes the longest and most expensive CIA covert operation in its history.

© Alamy

US President Ronald Reagan meets with mujahideen rebel leaders in the White House, 2 February 1983

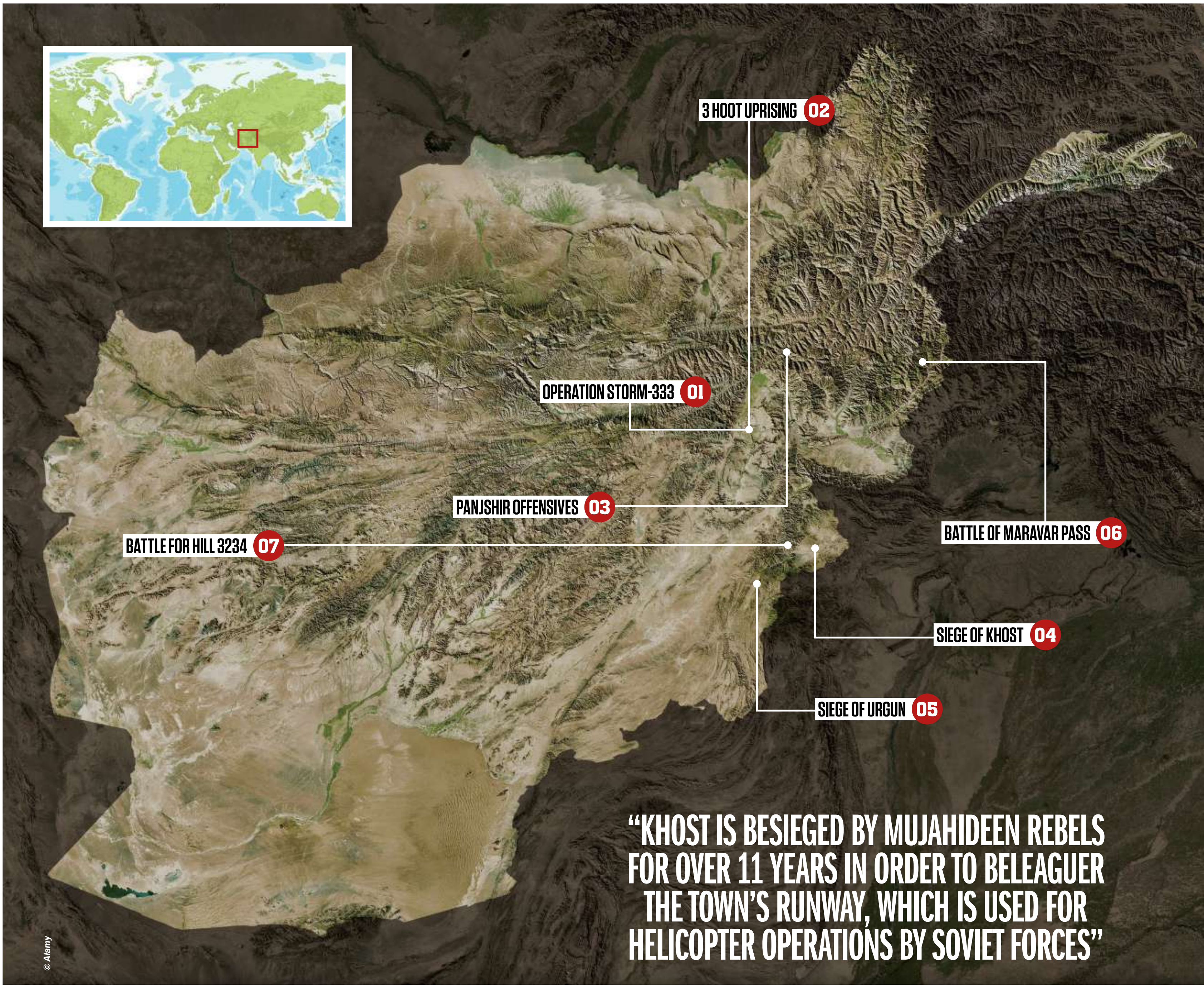
1980-85

PANJSHIR OFFENSIVES 03

The Soviets launch nine campaigns to expel mujahideen rebels from the strategically important Panjshir Valley in central Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of troops are deployed over five years amid intense fighting. Although the Soviets frequently occupy the valley, the mujahideen always retake it.

© Alamy

Abandoned Soviet tanks still litter the Panjshir Valley, a testament to their repeated failed attempts to defeat the mujahideen in this area


3 HOOT UPRISING 02
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BATTLE FOR HILL 3234 07
BATTLE OF MARAVAR PASS 06
SIEGE OF KHOST 04
SIEGE OF URGUN 05

© Alamy

> “KHOST IS BESIEGED BY MUJAHIDEEN REBELS FOR OVER 11 YEARS IN ORDER TO BELEAGUER THE TOWN’S RUNWAY, WHICH IS USED FOR HELICOPTER OPERATIONS BY SOVIET FORCES”

1980-91

SIEGE OF KHOST 04

Khost is besieged by mujahideen rebels for over 11 years in order to beleaguer the town’s runway, which is used for helicopter operations by Soviet forces. Road access to Khost is sealed off, which obliges the Soviets to airlift supplies to the garrison. The town is eventually captured by mujahideen forces in 1991.

Civilians in Khost cheer DRA soldiers, 25 May 1986

© Getty

August 1983-January 1984

SIEGE OF URGUN 05

A DRA garrison of 900 soldiers is besieged at Urgun by mujahideen forces. The rebels take the airfield but a DRA relief column breaks through the mujahideen blockade and relieves the garrison.

© Getty

***Above:** A DRA convoy drives through a tunnel in snowy conditions*

BATTLE OF MARAVAR PASS 06

Soviet Spetsnaz troops are ambushed by mujahideen rebels in a gorge. Heavy casualties are inflicted on a Spetsnaz company before relieving Russian airborne forces arrive. The rebels proceed to conduct a successful fighting withdrawal.

A Soviet convoy is destroyed in a mujahideen ambush

© Alamy

21-22 April 1985

BATTLE FOR HILL 3234 07

Thirty-nine Soviet paratroopers fight a successful defensive battle against hundreds of mujahideen rebels and Pakistani mercenaries as part of Operation Magistral. Fighting near an important strategic road, the Soviets suffer just two fatalities while inflicting heavy losses on the mujahideen during 12 separate attacks.

Re-enactors dressed as Soviet paratroopers

© Alamy

7-8 January 1988

19 November 1987-10 January 1988

A column of Soviet armoured forces

© Alamy

OPERATION MAGISTRAL

The Soviet 40th Army and DRA forces manage to relieve Khost when they enter the town on 30 December 1987. However, their armoured forces withdraw on 30 January. This allows the mujahideen to cut off Khost once more.

15 May 1988-15 February 1989

SOVIET WITHDRAWAL

The Soviets conduct a carefully planned withdrawal from Afghanistan in two phases. They continue to supply the DRA but the regime falls in 1992 and the country descends into civil war. The Soviet-Afghan conflict is also a major contributing factor in the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Soviet armoured personnel vehicles cross a bridge on the Soviet-Afghan border during the withdrawal of the Red Army, 21 May 1988

© Getty

LEADERS & COMMANDERS

From a dictator and a spymaster to a future terrorist, these men played a central role in the Soviet-Afghan War's vicious realpolitik

GENERAL MOHAMMAD ZIA-UL-HAQ

PAKISTAN'S MILITARY DICTATOR SUPPORTED THE MUJAHIDEEN WHILE SECRETLY ADVANCING A NUCLEAR WEAPONS STRATEGY

1924-88 **PAKISTAN**

Having come to power through a coup and imposing martial law, General Zia-ul-Haq's foresight never anticipated the Soviets getting so close to the Pakistani border. This put immense pressure on Islamabad as it did not have the resources to defend its porous border with Afghanistan. General Zia-ul-Haq's response was to adroitly manoeuvre himself as a beneficiary of US aid and the Arab states financing the Afghan resistance.

Over the course of a decade Pakistan received American money and F-16A/B multirole fighters as compensation for making the country's tribal frontier a safe haven where the mujahideen could muster and re-arm. Whether or not the CIA knew about the general's plans to import equipment for assembling nuclear weapons remains uncertain. It's possible Director William Casey's own judgment of the situation at the time, when the Reagan White House was supporting guerrillas in several countries, led to this glaring oversight. General Zia-ul-Haq's tolerance for Islamists was just as problematic as it drew radicalised young men to congregate in the cities where the mujahideen gathered.

Pakistan's conniving head of state was robbed of his place in the history books on 17 August 1988 when his official plane, a C-130 Hercules, crashed in the desert.

To this day, the circumstances surrounding Zia-ul-Haq's death are unresolved

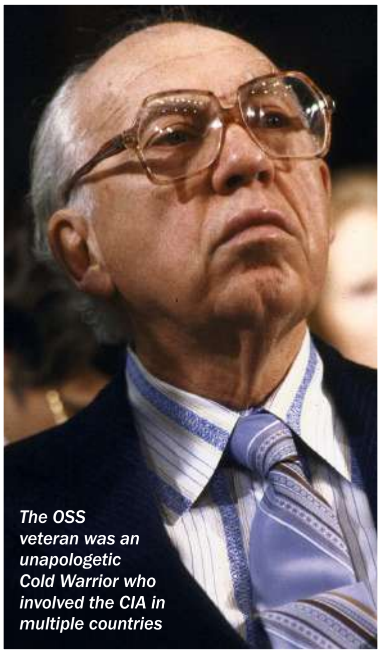
DIRECTOR WILLIAM CASEY

THE HEAD OF THE CIA CONCOCTED AN ELABORATE SCHEME TO EMBROIL THE SOVIETS IN AFGHANISTAN

1913-87 **USA**

Having learned the deadly trade of a covert operative during WWII when he served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), secrecy and subterfuge remained permanent fixtures in Casey's life. Having won his role as CIA Director for being a longtime Republican supporter, it was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that galvanized his most ambitious project. By 1982 the CIA had enlisted at least six partners, from petrol-rich Saudi Arabia to Communist China, in an elaborate geopolitical gamble: the CIA would funnel arms and money to the disorganised Afghan rebels with Pakistan taking care of the board and lodging. That is, the mujahideen and their jihadi allies had safe haven in cities like Peshawar and could direct their war close enough to the theatre.

Helping Casey along were other enthusiastic Americans such as Congressman Charlie Wilson, who used his influence to approve monetary support for the Afghan rebels. But these same covert operations became Casey's undoing. A scandal over illicit money transfers being funnelled to right-wing Nicaraguan rebels, as well as other financial shenanigans, tarnished Casey's name. He succumbed to a heart attack in 1987.



The OSS veteran was an unapologetic Cold Warrior who involved the CIA in multiple countries

Dostum is seen by many as the living embodiment of a typical Afghan warlord

ABDUL RASHID DOSTUM

RUTHLESS AND LOYAL TO HIS PEOPLE, DOSTUM HAS SURVIVED FOUR DECADES OF WAR

1954 - PRESENT **AFGHANISTAN**

A common misconception about the Soviet-Afghan War is the state of affairs after the USSR's departure from the country. The mujahideen factions carried on the struggle and this time the goal was toppling the communist regime in Kabul led by President Najibullah. But a serious roadblock to the effort was the imposing presence of the self-styled General Dostum, an Uzbek militia leader from the northwest whose style of governing combined local autonomy with rough justice.

Despite repeated allegations of atrocities by his personal army, Dostum's own worst tendencies paled in comparison to the jihadis and their enablers who prolonged the civil war until the Taliban took power in 1994. Never betraying his own people, Dostum held out in his enclave until Operation Enduring Freedom, when he joined American special forces in rolling back the Taliban. Dostum further embellished his warlord status by encouraging his men to fight on horseback even when under fire.

Dostum's ugly past – involving massacres and assorted crimes – may never sit well but his experience and longevity leaves him a force to be reckoned with in national politics.

PRESIDENT MOHAMMAD NAJIBULLAH

FEW HEADS OF STATE FELL FROM POWER AS WRETCHEDLY AS THIS POLITICIAN

1947-96 **AFGHANISTAN**

Installed by the Soviets in 1986 after the dismal leadership of President Babrak Karmal, President Najibullah struggled to compromise with the mujahideen, who by that time were openly allied with the United States. A doctor by profession, Najibullah's steady rise within the Afghan Communist party – also known as the PDPA – and his own credentials as a devoted socialist made him a convenient choice as a proxy who could be kept in power by Soviet military might.

But within a handful of years Najibullah and his crumbling government were left to fend for themselves. By 1992 the mujahideen had encircled Kabul and there was no longer an Afghan armed forces, much less a functioning government, worthy of the name. Neither did the fledgling Russian Federation, aimless and bankrupt, attempt to intervene on behalf of a former ally. Separated from his family and run out of office, Najibullah found safety by hiding in a United Nations compound.

No other Afghan leader met a worse fate than him. In 1996 the Taliban dragged him out into the street and tortured him to death. His body was then strung up and displayed to the public.

The doomed Najibullah was equally the strongest and weakest Afghan leader in modern times

> “NO OTHER AFGHAN LEADER MET A WORSE FATE THAN HIM”

OSAMA BIN LADEN

THE SAUDI RADICAL FOUND HIS TRUE CALLING IN AFGHANISTAN DURING THE 1980s

1957 – 2011 **SAUDI ARABIA/AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN**

A superb propagandist and demagogue, bin Laden's actual military experience was very limited

Growing up in an affluent family whose riches came from the patronage of the Saudi royals, the notorious terror leader was drawn to the Afghan jihad for reasons that are still unexplained. Like many Saudi idealists who joined the resistance, bin Laden's own participation was limited at best. The evidence of his “soldiering” with the mujahideen is scarce and what little survives is unremarkable. But the connections he made in Pakistan, such as meeting his longtime collaborator Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, served him well later on as he set out to build a world-spanning terrorist movement.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the subsequent in-fighting among the mujahideen forced bin Laden to search for another cause. At first it was the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait but the Gulf monarchies shunned bin Laden's offers to mobilise willing volunteers eager to liberate the country. After failing to establish the Al Qaeda organisation in Sudan, bin Laden found permanent allies with the Taliban who overran Kabul in 1996.

As the mastermind of the world's most horrific terror attacks bin Laden spent the last dozen years of his life a fugitive. On 2 May 2011 he was killed by US Navy SEALs during a raid on a walled compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

AHMAD SHAH MASSOUD

PERHAPS THE ONLY MUJAHIDEEN COMMANDER REVERED AS A NATIONAL HERO AND PATRIOT

1953 – 2001 **AFGHANISTAN**

The ethnic Tajik who held the Panjshir Valley against repeated Soviet incursions is still fondly remembered by many Afghans, be they comrades-in-arms or former enemies. Having defected to join the rebels once the Soviets installed a puppet government in Kabul, Massoud and his cohort endured many bitter years waging guerrilla war against the occupiers. It was only later in the conflict that their greater numbers and improved equipment allowed them to inflict huge losses against the Soviets.

Massoud's big mistake, however, was his utter failure to build a peaceful alliance with other mujahideen commanders, many of whom were actively plundering the country or were in league with jihadis who wanted to impose a theocracy. The years of devastation suffered by Afghanistan is a testament to this wasted opportunity.

On 9 September 2001 a team of journalists who were earlier vetted by Massoud's security detail turned out to be assassins trained by Al Qaeda. The 'Lion of the Panjshir' was killed by improvised explosives triggered at close range. Undeterred by the loss of their figurehead, the Tajiks of northwest Afghanistan still allied with the United States in removing the Taliban from power.

Few mujahideen veterans are as well-regarded today as Massoud, who was killed by Al Qaeda operatives on 9 September 2001

All images © Getty

SPETSNAZ

The Soviet Army's fearsome commandos led Moscow's sudden invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day, 1979. However, these elite killers struggled to adapt against the tenacious mujahideen

Spetsnaz troops are trained to kill high-value targets and carry out sabotage operations

© Getty

Shrouded in mystery throughout the Cold War, the actual role of the spetsnaz in the Soviet armed forces was as vanguards for an invasion force. Being a special operations branch, however, meant their exact place in the Soviet army's structure was hard to discern, but it was understood the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) controlled the training and deployment of spetsnaz anywhere. If comparisons have to be made, these spetsnaz had more in common with the US Army Rangers rather than the British SAS. Should war break out in Central Europe it was expected the spetsnaz and the Russian Airborne Forces (VDV) were to be the first to engage NATO forces in West Germany as the Warsaw Pact's armoured divisions poured into the Fulda Gap.

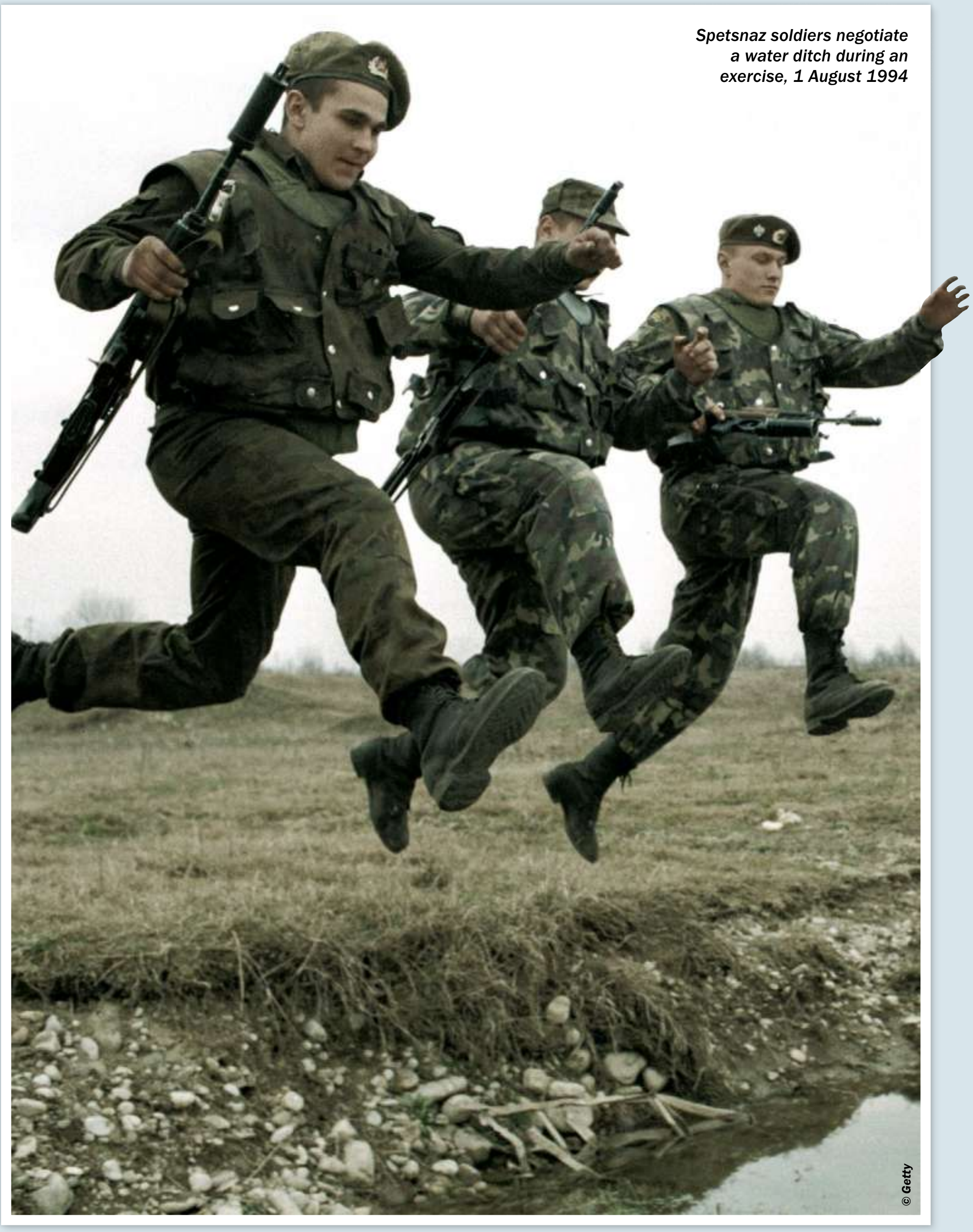
Another distinction of the spetsnaz is their training as assassins for high-level targets such as heads of state and other important leaders. This operational skill first came to NATO's attention when the Soviets took over Czechoslovakia in 1968 and then did the same in Afghanistan 11 years later. There were also spetsnaz assigned to the KGB, known as the Alfa unit, whose members allegedly executed President Hafizullah Amin on December 29, 1979.

As a special forces branch whose exact size was never ascertained by any NATO intelligence agency, spetsnaz membership shared much in common with other special forces when selecting recruits. The best personal qualifications are a career soldier's educational attainment and physical stamina. The differences began with the training that, according to many unconfirmed accounts during the Cold War, emphasised building psychological strength and exercising ruthlessness. The spetsnaz practised the uglier traditions of the Soviet military, which is the collective hazing of recruits by fighting multiple opponents with their bare hands. An enduring assumption about the spetsnaz, equally mythical yet somewhat true, is each member was indoctrinated to resist capture or surrender at any cost. Anecdotal evidence from Russia's present campaign in Syria suggests this is credible.

Once Afghanistan was under occupation with a puppet government installed, the spetsnaz's role in securing the beleaguered country grew. As anti-Soviet resistance spread beyond the cities under Soviet control – the capital Kabul, Kunduz, Herat, Kandahar, and Mazar-i-Sharif – the spetsnaz were committed to a form of counterinsurgency that focused on locating the mujahideen bases and their leadership. This mission became more difficult over the years as the spetsnaz, just like American and NATO special forces today, were unable to cross over into Pakistan and conduct operations against high-value targets. But the spetsnaz did manage to disrupt some of the mujahideen's external supply network. Since ammunition and equipment were delivered by pack animals and small transports over mountain trails, setting up ambushes was an effective method for stopping these movements. In a boon to the spetsnaz reputation, the mujahideen never confirmed having taken any as prisoners, and casualties among these Soviet commandos were minimal. One more crucial distinction that separated the spetsnaz from regular Soviet conscripts was their choice of kit. The helmets were replaced by flop hats or local headscarves and the usual paratrooper's coveralls were matched with Adidas sneakers, as these were better on long treks rather than boots. Remarkably, the spetsnaz equipped themselves like American special forces in Vietnam, eschewing standard-issue firearms like the AK-74 for the AK-47 and AKM since these fired larger 7.62x39mm ammunition.

The spetsnaz were not immune to the problems faced by the Soviet army in Afghanistan. As the war dragged on morale suffered and these commandos became less effective as the once invincible air support, especially helicopter transports, dwindled as the mujahideen's anti-aircraft missiles took their toll. The quagmire in Afghanistan haunted them long after the Cold War and the Russian army's difficult campaigns in Chechnya were another low point as the spetsnaz were accused of committing human rights violations. The spetsnaz regained some of their former prestige when Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula and fomented a separatist war in Ukraine from 2014 onward. In this ongoing conflict the spetsnaz displayed the same skills that once filled NATO commanders with dread: flawless infiltration, the ability to track and eliminate VIPs, and laying the disruptive groundwork for a large-scale military operation.

> **"THE SPETSNAZ WERE COMMITTED TO A FORM OF COUNTERINSURGENCY THAT FOCUSED ON LOCATING THE MUJAHIDEEN BASES AND THEIR LEADERSHIP"**



Spetsnaz soldiers negotiate a water ditch during an exercise, 1 August 1994

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AMERICA'S JIHADIS

How did the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan create a vacuum filled by radical Islamists? A combination of American indifference and short-sightedness had lasting consequences

Even before the shock of the Soviet invasion settled, a consensus view emerged in American policy circles, and later on with the press and politicians, that Afghanistan could serve as a springboard for impending Soviet plans to reach 'warm water'. This imagined geopolitical risk was so pervasive that it galvanized steady support for the anti-Soviet mujahideen as well as a beleaguered Pakistan, whose ruling strongman General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq welcomed the Americans' involvement. With the threat of another war with India always on the horizon, Pakistan's leader understood he couldn't afford to ignore the immense Soviet army that was now patrolling the Durand Line, the artificial border separating Afghanistan from Pakistan.

But half the duration of the Soviet-Afghan War was a futile struggle for the mujahideen. They were never united into a coalition and faced terrifying odds as the Soviets unleashed the full brunt of their conventional military to crush the rebels. Meanwhile, thanks to the CIA's persistence and its local ally the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan, financial and material support arrived – but only in trickles. It was not until 1986 that the Reagan administration resolved to openly boost the mujahideen, and that year the US delivered batches of Stinger shoulder-launched SAMs along with other sophisticated NATO weaponry such as Milan anti-tank missiles. China was also an accomplice as huge quantities of assault rifles, machine guns and rockets paid for by the CIA were shipped to Karachi and then distributed by the ISI.

The Stinger SAM, an improvement over the earlier Redeye designed for the US Army, is still considered the iconic weapon of

> "THE REST OF THE WORLD SOON PAID A PRICE FOR IGNORING AFGHANISTAN'S DESCENT INTO ISLAMISM"

the Soviet-Afghan War – a proverbial game-changer. But its actual impact on the Soviets was negligible except for discouraging the helicopter flights vital for resupplying far-flung bases. Only a few dozen fixed-wing aircraft were actually shot down using Stingers, while the losses of rotorcraft peaked in the war's last years. The real headache was the Soviets' failure to adapt their Hind and Hip helicopters with sufficient countermeasures against the portable missiles.

This problem exacerbated the Soviets' ongoing quagmire. In the final years of their long campaign morale in both the 40th Army and the Afghan armed forces had almost collapsed, and desertion and narcotics use were tearing apart the ranks. The financial burden of the long war was already being felt in Moscow, whose global reputation took another blow in 1986 when the Chernobyl power plant erupted in the Ukrainian SSR. The threat of the Stinger missiles and the mujahideen's growing numbers floored the Soviet generals, whose strategy never moved beyond employing more and more firepower against the defenceless Afghan populace.

By the time the last Soviet troops departed in February 1989 the newly elected Bush administration exulted over their symbolic victory at the cost of only a few billion dollars. As American financial aid dwindled the mujahideen factions, disunited as ever and now armed to the teeth, fought the regime of President Mohammed Najibullah in Kabul. The Soviets had left their ally a well-armed military supported by local militias who distrusted the Pashtun-dominated mujahideen. The civil war lasted for another few years until Najibullah fled his palace in 1992 after the mujahideen, by then financed by the Gulf monarchies, bombarded Kabul and left much of the city ruined. Failing to establish a lasting peace and an interim government, the rebels continued fighting, with the Uzbek warlord General Dostum carving a fiefdom in Afghanistan's northwest while Tajiks like Ahmad Shah Massoud maintained a stronghold in the east.

At this point, Afghanistan no longer mattered to the foreign policy of the United States. Meanwhile, in Pakistan's teeming refugee camps a generation of radicalised young men educated in Saudi-funded madrassas, or schoolhouses, launched a reformation movement of sorts. How much support the government of Pakistan extended to the fledgling Taliban at the time is unquantifiable. By 1996, however, they had overrun much of Afghanistan and imposed a brutal legal code that enforced religious adherence and corporal punishment. The establishment of terror camps in the country with illicit funding, even when these were known to American intelligence agencies for years, was the Taliban's worst-kept secret.

The rest of the world soon paid a price for ignoring Afghanistan's descent into Islamism. The horror of the September 11 attacks, when four hijacked passenger planes filled with civilians were used for catastrophic suicide operations, launched a punitive 'war on terror' that saw the US and its allies remove the Taliban from power in late-2001 and hunt Al Qaeda on a global scale. As an international coalition set to rebuild Afghanistan it's apparent many former mujahideen, whose leaders found new prominence as local politicians, actually served the new government while the extremists of the Taliban committed to a long-term insurgency.

The anti-Soviet mujahideen, for all their faults, were not the forerunners to global terror. Rather, the extreme fringes of their cause exploited Afghanistan's chaos amid the world's indifference to a long-suffering country. Now the world still pays a price for Afghanistan's trouble.

The CIA began delivering Stinger SAM launchers to the mujahideen from 1986 onward. Its effect on Soviet morale was greater than actual combat losses to these missiles

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SIEGE OF KHOST

Mujahideen forces besieged a Soviet-DAR garrison for over a decade, despite repeated Red Army relief efforts

A Soviet soldier with his dog at Khost, 19 January 1988

© Getty

The capital of a province with the same name, Khost is the largest city in southeast Afghanistan. Before the 1980s it already had a tradition of warfare and was the location for three rebellions between 1856-1925 against ruling Afghan emirs. However, its biggest test came during the Soviet-Afghan War when a siege of the city lasted for as long as the conflict itself.

When the Soviet 40th Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979, mujahideen rebels in the southeast based themselves in a mountain range in Paktia province. This controlled the only land route between Khost and Gardez, which effectively cut off the Soviet advance into the region. The mujahideen established especially good defences along a highway that frustrated the efforts of a large Soviet garrison at Khost, along with their Afghan allies from the ruling Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DAR). Khost is close to the Pakistani border, which made the road from Gardez a vital Soviet supply route. Mujahideen forces sealed off the road and besieged Khost from 1980, although they did not anticipate that they would invest the city for eleven years.

The reason the siege lasted for such a long time was that the garrison had access to an airstrip. The runway, which was 3km long, enabled the Soviets to use Khost as a base for helicopter operations and also kept the city supplied by air. The first few years of the siege saw the 40th Army make various attempts to relieve Khost but they were repeatedly thwarted by the mujahideen. In March 1982, a battalion of Soviet armoured vehicles was ambushed in the Shahi Kot Valley, while there were two failed offensives in 1983 and 1984. During August to September 1985, a particularly large Soviet offensive managed to enter Khost itself but they were forced back to Gardez. After the relief column withdrew, the mujahideen resumed the siege and once more obstructed the road.

Operation Magistral

By late-1987, Khost's garrison numbered 8,000 men and the Soviets decided to launch the largest offensive of the war to relieve the city. Operation Magistral was also designed to prove the DAR Army's fighting abilities, and the combined Soviet-DAR force numbered 28,000 men. Opposing them were approximately 20,000 mujahideen rebels, who were armed with US-supplied surface-to-air missiles. These weapons intensified the siege and cut the garrison's air supplies. Many civilians fled as shortages increased, with food doubling in price.

Magistral was launched on 19 November 1987 with Soviet soldiers from 40th Army accounting for 20,000 of the relief force. The remaining 8,000 were from the DAR armed forces and their contribution was planned to show their combat capabilities. The Soviets and DAR fought their way through the mountains from Gardez, and during 28 November to 1 December they launched an attack against well-defended mujahideen positions in the Satukandav Pass. The Soviets initially withdrew under heavy fire but a combined force of Soviet paratroopers and DAR commandos managed to capture the high ground above the pass. The mujahideen quickly retreated to prevent encirclement, although they continued to lay mines, spring ambushes and harass the enemy with rocket fire as they withdrew in the face of superior numbers.

The Soviets now began to launch limited airborne attacks both inside and on the outskirts of Khost. Missile attacks from the mujahideen hindered progress but the city was finally relieved on 30 December 1987. For the next month, Soviet and DAR forces managed to keep the Gardez-Khost road open by establishing outposts along the route. Operation Magistral had been a tactical success for the Soviets and DAR but it became a Pyrrhic victory. As in 1985, the relief of Khost was only temporary because the tide of the war was slowing turning in the mujahideen's favour across Afghanistan.

The main body of Soviet-DAR forces withdrew from the city and their roadside outposts in late-January 1988, which enabled the mujahideen to encircle Khost yet again. The Soviet Union then signed the Geneva Accords three months later that committed its armed forces to withdrawing from the whole country. It was left to the DAR to garrison Khost and they continued to defend the city from the mujahideen before capitulating in a negotiated surrender on 31 March 1991. This was over a decade since the siege had begun and two years since the last Soviet troops had departed from Afghanistan.

OKSVA: 40TH ARMY

The Red Army's occupying force in Afghanistan was specially reformed for the Soviet-Afghan War after previously seeing extensive service during WWII

The Soviet 40th Army existed in two very distinct phases during its 20th century history. It was first formed in 1941 after the German invasion of Russia during Operation Barbarossa and almost immediately suffered heavy casualties at the Battle of Kiev. It continued to fight on the Eastern Front in engagements such as Operation Blau and the battles of Kursk and Dnieper. By the end of WWII, the army was in Czechoslovakia participating in the Prague Offensive before it was disbanded in July 1945.

40th Army was reformed in December 1979 and became the core of the Soviet occupation force in Afghanistan, which was abbreviated to OKSVA. Primarily consisting of motor rifle and airborne divisions, 40th Army was largely supplied in Afghanistan through the Salang Pass, which transported hundreds of logistics vehicles from the USSR.

During the ten-year period of its second formation, 40th Army was commanded by seven different lieutenant generals – none of whom were able to tip the war in the Soviet Union's favour. Its last commander, Boris Gromov, was awarded the USSR's highest decoration – the Hero of the Soviet Union – after the temporary success of Operation Magistral. However, Gromov was also the last Soviet soldier to leave Afghanistan on 15 February 1989 across the Friendship Bridge on the Afghan-Uzbek border. 40th Army was disbanded again shortly afterwards in 1990.

Some of the final Soviet soldiers of 40th Army to leave Afghanistan are pictured in Uzbekistan after their withdrawal, February 1989. Soviet veterans of the war are known as 'Warriors-Internationalists'

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BRITAIN'S FIRST COMMANDOS

The Commandos were a new unit created to 'butcher' the Nazis at Churchill's demand, but it took time to turn them into killers

WORDS **GAVIN MORTIMER**

On the evening of 24 April 1940 a Royal Navy submarine departed Rosyth in Scotland bound for Norway on what was codenamed 'Operation Knife'. On board HMS Truant were seven men described by the vessel's captain, Lieutenant Commander Christopher Hutchinson, as "a bunch of cut-throats", armed with plastic explosive and a variety of "ghastly looking" weapons.

The seven were led by a Scots Guards officer, Bryan Mayfield, and included Peter Kemp, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and Bill Stirling, a former Guards officer and one of the wealthiest landowners in Scotland.

Fifteen days earlier, on 9 April, Germany had invaded Norway, occupying the capital Oslo as well as Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. The Norwegians, assisted by a hastily assembled British Expeditionary Force, had offered spirited resistance, and the seven men in the Truant were on their way to Sognefjord, north of the western city of Bergen, to embark upon a sabotage campaign against Nazi lines of communications.

Eight hours after its departure from Scotland, the Truant was rocked by a powerful explosion. The damage caused by the mine was bad enough for Hutchinson to abort the mission and return to Rosyth.

The Admiralty promised the seven men that a second attempt would be made to transport them to Norway, but it might take a day or two to provide a replacement submarine. In the meantime Stirling invited his comrades to stay at his lavish estate at Keir, close to the town of Dunblane. They were soon informed that Operation Knife had been cancelled because of the collapse of Allied resistance in Norway. So what were they to do now?

To a degree, they were relieved that the operation hadn't materialised: they had military training but there was a world of difference between guerrilla fighting and what one learned at the Guards' depot. Stirling took the initiative. "It was Stirling's idea that the six of us, reinforced by a few selected officers and NCOs, should form the nucleus of a new training school," said Kemp. "We should begin with cadre courses for junior officers from different units of the army. Mayfield was to be commandant, Stirling chief instructor."

Stirling and Mayfield travelled to London in the first week of May 1940 and presented their idea to the War Office to establish a training centre in Scotland where soldiers could be schooled in the art of guerrilla fighting.

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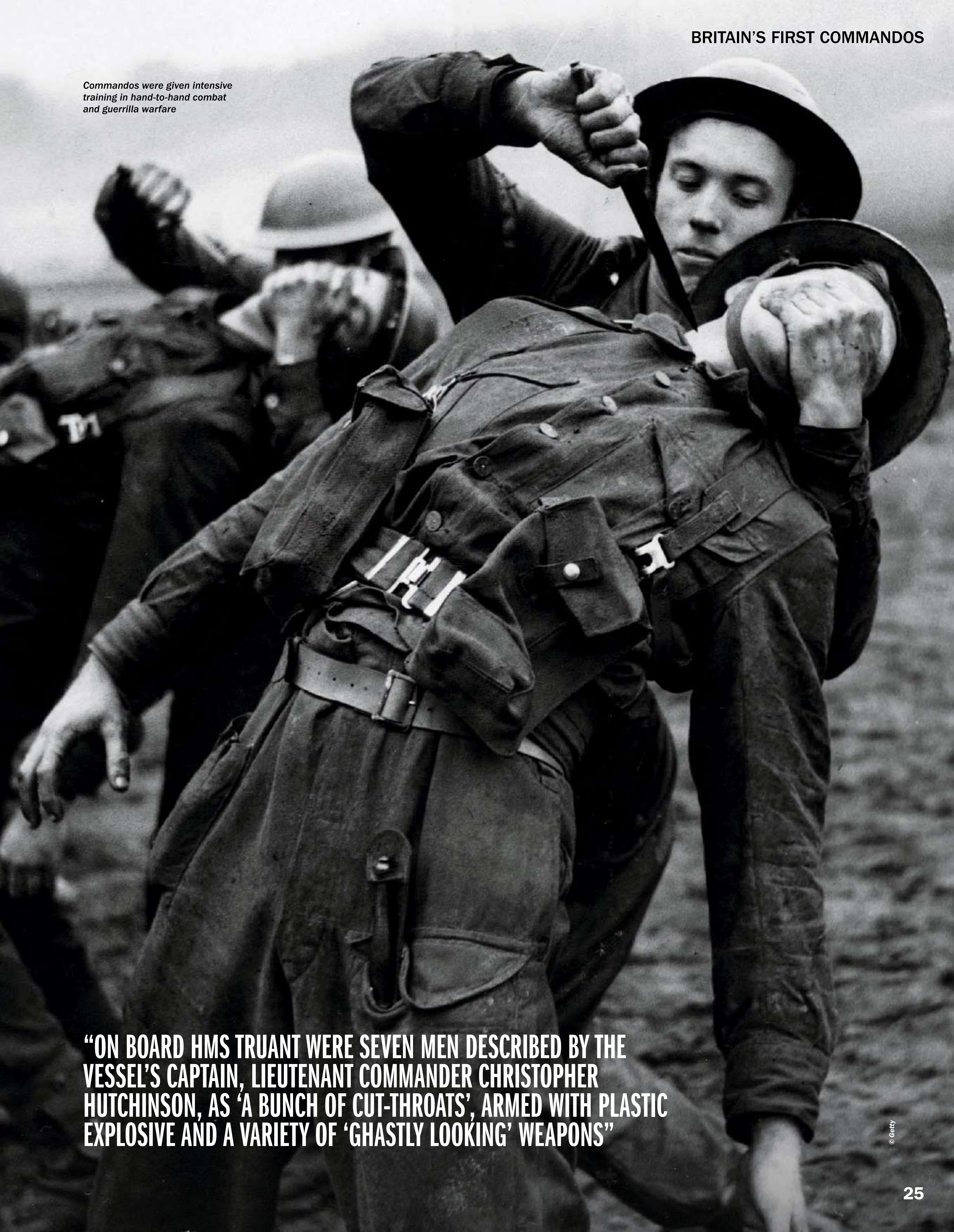
Left: *Soldier from No. 3 Commando armed with a 'Tommy gun', at Largs in Scotland, 2 May, 1942*

Men of No 4 Army Commando advancing towards Ouistreham, 6 June 1944

© Getty

Gavin Mortimer is a best-selling author, TV consultant and expert on special forces units of the Second World War. His recent books include *The First Eagles, The SBS In World War II: An Illustrated History,* and *The SAS In World War II*



Commandos were given intensive training in hand-to-hand combat and guerrilla warfare

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"ON BOARD HMS TRUANT WERE SEVEN MEN DESCRIBED BY THE VESSEL'S CAPTAIN, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER HUTCHINSON, AS 'A BUNCH OF CUT-THROATS', ARMED WITH PLASTIC EXPLOSIVE AND A VARIETY OF 'GHASTLY LOOKING' WEAPONS"

Action not appeasement

Their timing could not have been better. On 10 May Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Britain now had a leader of boldness and pugnacity, determined to fight back against the Nazis by any means possible.

On 3 June Stirling and Mayfield were released from the Scots Guards with permission to establish the Commando Special Training Centre at Lochailort in the north-west of Scotland. There to greet them upon their arrival was Simon Fraser, 15th Lord Lovat, Stirling's cousin, who owned the land around Lochailort.

Fraser was appointed senior instructor in fieldcraft, one of a team of experts recruited to Lochailort. Others included mountaineers, explorers, an Olympic shooting gold medallist in Cyril Mackworth Praed, and two former Shanghai policemen, William Fairbairn and Eric Sykes, who taught students the art of close-quarter combat.

Also in the first week of June, Churchill issued a memorandum to his chiefs of staff instructing them to establish Britain's first special forces: "We have always set our faces against this idea but… enterprises must be prepared, with specially trained troops, who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts, first of all on the 'butcher and bolt' policy, but later on, or perhaps as soon as we are organised, we should surprise Calais or Boulogne, kill or capture the Hun garrison."

Churchill's thinking was in line with Lt-Colonel Dudley Clarke's, the Military Assistant to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lt-General Sir John Dill. Clarke had spent some of his childhood in South Africa and was an admirer of the Boer commandos, who had fought so bravely and innovatively against the British in the war of 1899-1902. It was Clarke who suggested calling this new force 'commandos'.

Men volunteered for a variety of reasons. Bernard Davis, from the ranks of the Royal Artillery, was still smarting from the humiliation he had suffered in France and Belgium the previous month. "We had been back from Dunkirk about one month… and we were fed up," he recalled. "We had no weapons to speak off, we were just doing routine marching and swimming. And one day a smart young officer from the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry arrived."

The officer explained the role of the commandos and then asked for volunteers. Davis was one of about 20 who became part of D Troop, No4 Commando. "For a lot of us it was a desire to get our own back for the defeat we had suffered in Belgium," he said.

There were initially 12 Commando units, each one comprised of eight assault Troops, a heavy weapons Troop and a signals Troop (approximately 600 men and 40 officers). On 17 July Admiral Sir Roger Keyes was appointed Director of Combined Operations and his son, Geoffrey, was one of the early recruits to the commandos.

John Price of the Royal Warwicks, who had been evacuated from Dunkirk, volunteered for the commandos without knowing anything about their purpose. "We were reassembled (after Dunkirk) at Hereford and there was a notice for volunteers for special duties, but it did not specify what it was for," he said. "To be honest I wanted to get out of that unit. I felt it was like a flock of sheep being led to the slaughter."

There was also the lure of extra pay: 13 and fourpence for officers and six and eightpence for the men.

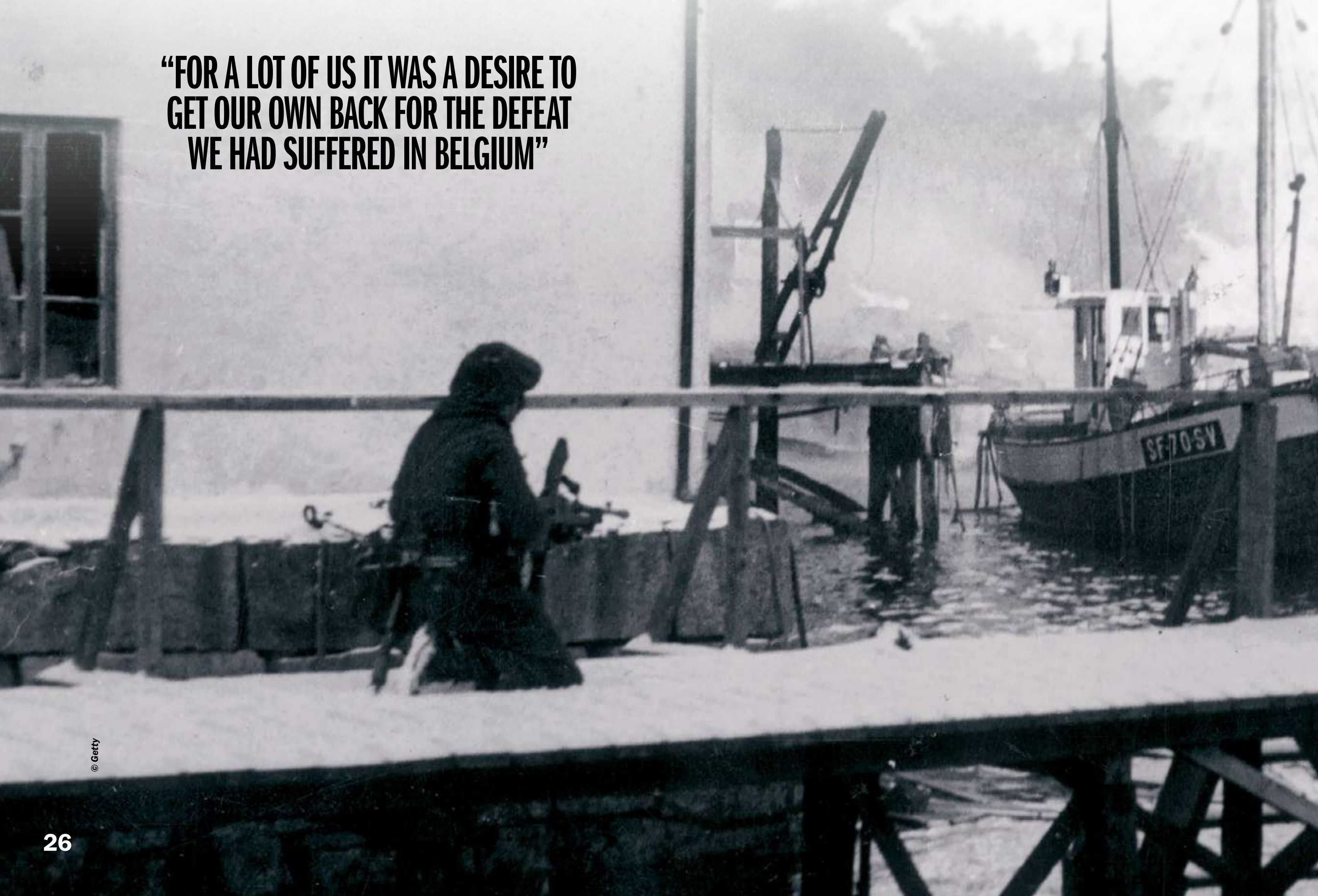
Price became a member of A Troop No4 Commando, based in Weymouth. "We spent most of the time on the beaches, getting fit, and we gradually worked up doing longer marches, and we got bicycles and went on long bicycle tours," he said.

Throughout July and into early August the threat of a German invasion was Britain's main concern. "We were to be first line defence and we used to sleep down on Portland beach every night with hand grenades," remembered Price.

Failure and frustration

Once the prospect of a German invasion had receded by the early autumn, the commandos were sent north to Scotland to broaden their training. Many of the officers and senior NCOS passed in small parties through the Special Training Centre at Lochailort while the men were billeted across the country: No4 Commando was in Troon, for example, No2 in Ayr, No3 and No8 in Largs and Nos 1 and 9 in Irvine.

"We used to go away in troops," recalled Price. "We would go mountaineering in North



"FOR A LOT OF US IT WAS A DESIRE TO GET OUR OWN BACK FOR THE DEFEAT WE HAD SUFFERED IN BELGIUM"

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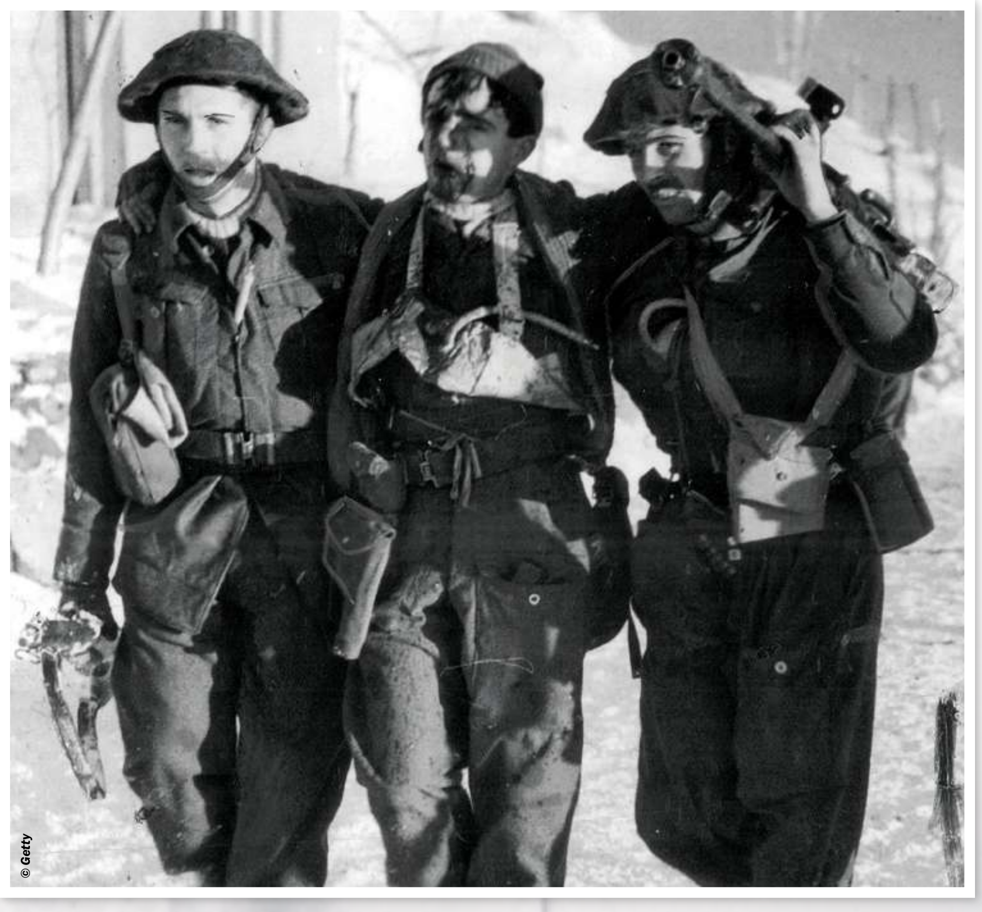
Wales, cliff climbing in Cornwall, potholing in Derbyshire, and doing exercises up the West coast on and off ships."

A significant event occurred on 30 October 1940 when the commandos were reorganised into the Special Service Brigade and, somewhat thoughtlessly, abbreviated to the SS Brigade. There were five battalions within the Brigade, each composed of two Commando units. No3 (A Company) and No8 (B Company) became 4 SS Battalion, and this was one of three earmarked for Operation Workshop, along with 2 and 3 Battalions, under the overall command of Lt-Colonel Bob Laycock.

The object of the mission was to capture the Italian island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean, but after weeks of hard training and rehearsals, Workshop was cancelled. "Despondency was the order of the day," wrote Laycock, although Major Alan Smallman of 4 SS Battalion was relieved at the outcome. "It would have been a disaster because we were not ready for an operation on that scale," he recalled. "Up until that time the only raids had been small scale raids across the channel: a not particularly successful raid on Guernsey and a lot of training exercises. But Roger Keyes, being the type of sailor he was, was determined to let the commandos see blood. Fortunately the chiefs of staff saw the lights before the blood and the operation fell through."

To recompense the men for all their hard work, Keyes sent the commandos on a fortnight's leave; when they returned they



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Above: *Lt Dennis O'Flaherty, middle, was shot in the mouth and lost an eye during the Vaagso fighting. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his courage*

An oil factory burns in the aftermath of the Vaagso raid as commandos look on from a nearby pier

discovered that the Special Service Battalions had been dropped and the Commando Units restored. Three of them – Nos 7, 8 and 11 – were designated Force Z and on the night of 31 January sailed for North Africa. Among their number were several men who would go on to find fame fighting in other units: David Stirling, Blair Mayne and Bill Fraser in the SAS; David Sutherland, Roger Courtney and George Jellicoe in the SBS; and Geoffrey Keyes and Tommy MacPherson, who took part in the 'Rommel Raid' of November 1941, the former receiving a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Meanwhile, recalled Smallman, "No3 Commando went back to Largs… and I became adjutant just about the time when we were lined up to take the Azores. That was an operation [codenamed 'Brisk'] that again did not come off."

The cancellation of Workshop and Brisk, coupled with the unsuccessful raid on Guernsey the previous July, when the commandos had failed to find a single German, further eroded morale. Spirits were just as low among the commandos who disembarked in the Middle East in March 1941. As the novelist Evelyn Waugh – a member of No8 Commando – recorded in his diary shortly after arriving in Egypt: "The feelings of the Bde [Brigade] were well summed up by an inscription found on the troop decks of Glengyle. 'Never in the history of human endeavour have so few been so buggered about by so many.'"

> **"NEVER IN THE HISTORY OF HUMAN ENDEAVOUR HAVE SO FEW BEEN SO BUGGERED ABOUT BY SO MANY"**

Brief but bloody

In the same month that Waugh was tickled by the wit of one of his commando comrades, Smallman and the men of No3 Commando were "delighted" to be briefed about an imminent raid on the Lofoten Islands in the north of Norway. Almost a year earlier the islands had been seized by the Germans, and the herring- and cod-oil factories in the ports of Stamsund, Henningsvaer, Svolvaer and Brettesnes were now supplying the Nazis with this precious commodity. No3 and No4 Commando were tasked with landing on the islands, destroying the factories, capturing Quislings and Nazis, and bringing back to Britain those locals wishing to enlist in the Norwegian forces exiled in London.

Not long before dawn on 4 March 1941 two infantry landing ships and their escort of five Royal Naval destroyers spotted the lights of the Lofoten Islands in the distance. "When we arrived in the [Vest] fjord… we found the fishing fleet coming out from Lofoten towards us, so we sailed towards them to be greeted by lots of waving from the Norwegians when they realised what was going on," recalled Smallman.

Price and his comrades in No4 Commando made for the ports of Svolvaer and Brettesnes. "We got into the landing craft from the mother ship and sailed into Svolvaer, and all was quiet," he remembered. "We were wondering when somebody was going to open up and do something about it, but we pulled up alongside the quay and one or two Norwegians said 'good morning' to us."

Price said that with no enemy in sight the commandos had "to go looking for them". What Germans they found were asleep and when roused they meekly assembled in the fish market. "The whole raid, which was supposed to take until about one o'clock, was done by about nine o'clock in the morning or just after," recalled Price. "So I spent the rest of the time fraternising with the locals."

Bernard Davis of No4 Commando said the most action he experienced during the raid was when he and some of his pals had a 'finders keepers' squabble over an enemy radio discovered in one ship.

Smallman and No3 Commando had also achieved total surprise upon landing at the ports of Stamsund and Henningsvaer. What Germans they rounded up were "technical experts", either overseeing the production of the oil that would be shipped to U-boat bases, or engineers in the process of constructing an airfield to speed up the delivery to the submarines that were causing such damage to Allied shipping in the North Atlantic. "We were there for about three or four hours and Norwegians were rushing down to the quayside, clammering to come with us," said Smallman. "Originally we had said we wouldn't bring any girls away but finally we brought quite a bevvy of girls who wanted to be nurses."

While the commandos socialised with the locals, a party of Royal Engineers set about destroying 11 factories, an electric-light plant and approximately 800,000 gallons of oil. Five ships of a maximum tonnage of 18,900 were sent to the bottom of the sea, and 225 prisoners were brought back to Britain.

The response to the raid was rapturous. Price recalled that Sir Roger Keyes greeted the commandos upon their return, and "he was highly delighted". So, too, was Churchill

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The rear-facing view from a Bomber Command Bristol Blenheim Mark IV, which took part in the raid on Vaagso

and the King of Norway, Haakon VII, who came to Scotland to offer their congratulations and watch the commandos go through their paces in training.

But the morale and the momentum fostered by the raid on the Lofoten Islands dissipated over the months that followed. In April a commando attack was launched on Boulogne but one landing craft was lost in the rough seas and the raid was aborted. They tried again a few days later. "But it was not a successful raid," said Davis. "One of the objects of the exercise was to capture the German radar installations, but we couldn't find them… we got soaking wet and nearly froze to death, that was the closest we got to being killed."

Blooded at Vaagso

The commandos received fresh impetus on 29 October 1941 when Keyes was succeeded as Director of Combined Operations by Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten. He changed the point of attack from France back to Norway, a coastline less vigorously defended and where opportunities for a morale-boosting raid were more plentiful. Vaagso, on the south-west coast, and the nearby island of Maaloy, were chosen as the targets.

The raiding party of 51 officers and 525 other ranks comprised No3 and No2 Commando, as well as a contingent from the Norwegian Royal Army. And to ensure maximum publicity Mountbatten attached a film crew of Harry Watt, a civilian film director, and Lieutenant Harry Rignold, Official Cinematographer to the War Office.

The pair embarked in the landing craft with the rest of the commandos just as dawn broke on 27 December 1941 and headed up the Vaags Fjord. Overhead RAF Blenheim bombers dropped smoke bombs on Vaagso. "We could see the anti-aircraft guns on the top of these cliffs shooting at the RAF," said Watt. "The RAF were bombing the island on which were a large number of very big guns… it was very frightening to realise that if anybody saw us those guns could be turned down on us and our open boats. What was tremendously British was from one of the boats a man started playing the bagpipes."

The only casualties suffered by the commandos as they neared the shoreline were from the RAF. "One of the Blenheims unfortunately was hit as it was flying in to drop its smoke canisters, and one of the canisters landed on our landing craft," recalled Smallman. "The phosphorus ignited and we had a number of casualties in the landing craft."

On landing the raiders split into five groups and undertook their prearranged instructions. Watt and Rignold attached themselves to Group Two, whose orders were to attack the town of South Vaagso and destroy a number of military and economic objectives, including a fish-oil factory and a power station. "There was some very severe fighting as we fought our way up through the town, though as adjutant I was more or less out of the fighting," said Smallman. "They had to fight their way more or less building by building and we did have some casualties. We lost two extremely good officers."

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A British Bren gunner pictured during the raid on Vaagso

Captain Herbert Forrester was killed as he led a charge on the German HQ, and the death of Captain John Giles was witnessed by Watt at a farmhouse. "There was a magnificent young British officer who had been a light heavyweight champion of the Territorial Army, and he went to the door and it was pretty well suspected that there were Germans inside," said Watt. "He kicked the door open but he didn't jump to the side at the same time… and a burst of machine gunfire came from inside, right across his chest, and he fell dead."

The fiercest resistance came in the northern part of the town, where the Germans sniped at the commandos from the windows of warehouses and factories. "It was while I was organising the job of burning down the warehouse, as opposed to rushing it, that I suddenly saw Lieutenant O'Flaherty and Trooper Sherington dash into the building by the front door," recalled Captain Peter Young. "They were both armed with Tommy guns… I felt I had to go, too. I was at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor when I heard two shots and both O'Flaherty and Sherington fell."

Both men survived their wounds and, as they were dragged to safety, their comrades threw a bucket of petrol into the room where the sniper was concealed, followed by a firebomb.

By early afternoon, South Vaagso was in British hands, as was Maaloy Island, after a short sharp fight in which Captain Martin Linge, commander of the Norwegian Royal Army force, was killed at the head of his men.

Just how many casualties the commandos had suffered became apparent to Smallman when they arrived back at Largs by train to be greeted by scores of wives who had been living with their husbands in private accommodation. "When the train drew into Largs we were met by quite a number of wives anxious to know what had happened to their husbands," said Smallman. "And I had the sad task, as did one or two other people, of explaining to wives whose husbands had been wounded, and one wife in particular, whose husband had been killed, what had happened."

Nonetheless, the raid had been a success, destroying a wireless station, four coast-defence guns, one anti-aircraft gun, a tank, nine ships and several factories. More than 150 of the enemy were killed and a further 98 taken into captivity. "Everybody was so utterly exhausted there was no celebration," recalled Watt, who with his cameraman had captured the intensity of the fighting. "There was a feeling the raid had been a success but it had paid pretty heavily. It was a prestige raid more than anything. Militarily it was not worth much at all, but from publicity and prestige it was worth it."

Indeed. In the days that followed the British press lauded its lion-hearted commandos, with photos of the raid and heart-warming stories from some of the 77 Norwegians rescued from Vaagso. "None of us," Harald Hansen told reporters, "will ever forget how the commandos came and gave us our freedom and new hope for the future."

© Getty

***Above:** A wounded commando is helped by comrades during the raid on Vaagso*

"THEIR COMRADES THREW A BUCKET OF PETROL INTO THE ROOM WHERE THE SNIPER WAS CONCEALED, FOLLOWED BY A FIREBOMB"

British Commandos on the look out for snipers among the ruins of Osnabruk, April 1945

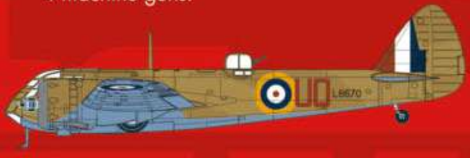
© Alamy

1:48

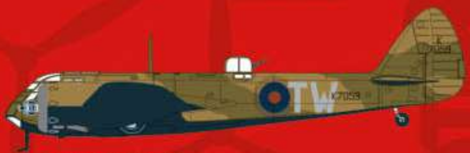
BRISTOL BLENHEIM Mk.I

A09190 1:48 BRISTOL BLENHEIM Mk.I

The first of the Bristol Blenheim series of light bombers first flew in 1935 after Lord Rothermere had challenged the British aircraft industry to build a high-speed transport plane. Bristol already had a suitable machine on the drawing board and the Type 142 was named 'Britain First'. The Air Ministry ordered the bomber version of the type straight from the drawing board. Capable of speeds comparable to the biplane fighters of the day, the Blenheim seemed a modern machine but by the outbreak of WWII fighter development had rendered the Blenheim vulnerable, the Mk.I bomber was defended by just a single machine gun in the turret and a fixed machine gun in the wing. The Blenheim was a versatile machine, serving across the globe and as the Blenheim Mk.IF, it was even pressed into service as a heavy fighter with an underbelly arrangement of 4 machine guns.



SBRISTOL BLENHEIM Mk.I
No. 211 Squadron, Royal Air Force, Menidi, Greece, 1941.



BRISTOL BLENHEIM Mk.I
No. 90 Squadron, Royal Air Force Bicester, Oxfordshire, England, autumn 1938.

Length 258mm Width 357mm Pieces 216

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1:48 BRISTOL BLENHEIM Mk.I

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"ALWAYS BE STRONG"

INTERVIEW WITH MERVYN KERSH

This Jewish veteran describes his experiences serving as a soldier in the British Army, from Normandy to the liberation of Bergen-Belsen

Image: Mervyn Kersh

Mervyn Kersh pictured during his army service in 1944

WORDS: **TOM GARNER**

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp was one of the most horrendous discoveries made by British armed forces during WWII. Approximately 60,000 people, the majority of them Jews, were found in starving and mortally ill conditions while thousands more bodies lay unburied around the camp. It was an event that horrified the world as one of the most appalling symbols of Nazi brutality.

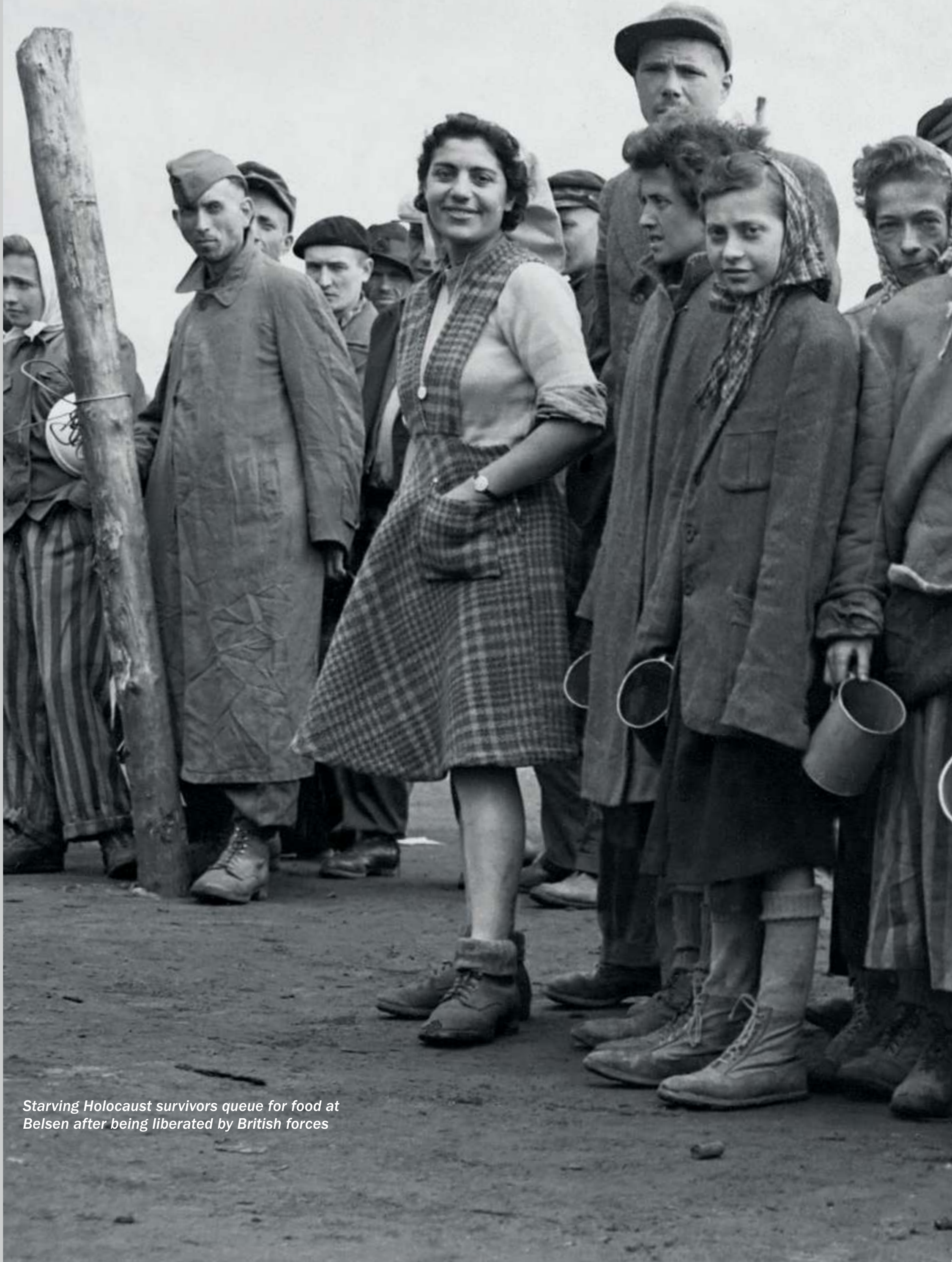
Belsen's liberators were profoundly moved, and for one British soldier meeting the survivors had particular resonance. Private Mervyn Kersh was a 21-year-old Jewish Londoner who had been advancing across Western Europe ever since he landed in Normandy in June 1944. A member of the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), he had been liberating occupied towns and cities for months, but Belsen was a different proposition.

Over 75 years since his service, Kersh is a tireless volunteer who has been nationally recognised for raising awareness of the horrors of WWII. He describes how he survived the Normandy Campaign, tended to the survivors of Belsen and how he coped with antisemitism in his own army.

"Hard times"

Born in December 1923, Kersh grew up in a household where current affairs were regularly discussed. "We knew war was coming and I used to listen to conversations between my father and uncle," he says. "From the time of the Spanish Civil War they argued about Germany and Italy's intentions. I remember Czechoslovakia being handed over and then there was Austria. When Poland was invaded we were completely unprepared and when war broke out I was still at school."

Kersh knew about the growing threat of antisemitism in Nazi Germany: "We were aware of the ill-treatment of minority groups but not the scale of it. I didn't know the true extent until 1942 when somebody escaped from the Nazis. The message was brought to Britain and reported in a newspaper, which I've still got a copy of."



Starving Holocaust survivors queue for food at Belsen after being liberated by British forces

© Alamy

Above: *British and Commonwealth troops organise boxes of ammunition and supplies on a Normandy beach*

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Above: *British soldiers hand out cigarettes to liberated French civilians in Pont-Audemer, Normandy*

© Getty

Kersh was evacuated several times during the Blitz. "I kept a record of every single air raid and they were hard times because we were in the thick of it," he says. "I was evacuated with a school because my uncle was a teacher there, although I learned nothing apart from perhaps about girls! I came back but then my mother had an operation and I had to leave and go to Exeter. My education dropped and by the time I went to college I was called up in 1943."

***Below:** Mervyn Kersh discovered this Wehrmacht map at the requisitioned headquarters of the 21st Panzer Division in Normandy*

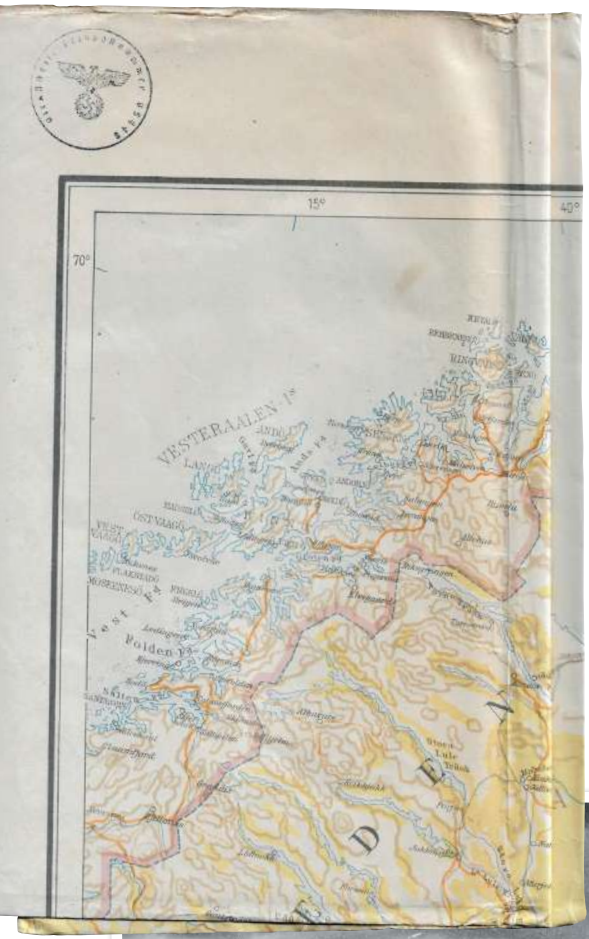

Image: Mervyn Kersh

Conscripted into the British Army, Kersh was a keen recruit. "It was almost inevitable, although there were ways you could get around it. You could get a reserved occupation but I wanted to be in the army," he says. "My big brother had already been in the RAF from the beginning of the war and my sister was a nurse, so as the baby of the family I was now doing my bit."

Sent to Scotland for training with the Black Watch, Kersh already knew some rudimentary soldiering skills. "I had had some military training in the Jewish Lads' Brigade, although we used sticks instead of rifles. However, I knew about marching, map reading, field craft, Morse code, being obedient and things like that. They were happy days, despite the hardship. I'd left London in the hot sunshine of June and arrived in Scotland in deep snow! It was a bit of shock."

During training, Kersh underwent various interviews and tests to define his particular role but he accidentally found himself being placed in the RAOC. "I was given to understand that I might go in the Royal Engineers because I liked map drawing. I was following the Eastern Front on a huge map that I'd drawn but when it came to it 1,000 of us were called out on a square and told to go to points A, B, C and D. When I got to the point I was told to go to, it turned out it was something called the RAOC. I'd been listed from the Ordnance Survey in the Royal Engineers to the ordnance stores. By then, it was too late to do anything about it."

Kersh could also have been promoted but he declined the offer. "After initial training I had been put forward for promotion but out of political correctness I chose to stay with my comrades – something I've regretted ever since! I reached the giddy heights of private but I did become an acting sergeant much later during my last days in the army."

Apart from training, Kersh also had to contend with institutional antisemitism in the army. During his evacuation to Devon, he had earned a reputation as a talented schoolboy boxer and used this to prevent physical assaults. "When I went in the army, the first thing I did – and wherever I went – was let them know I was a champion boxer and nobody ever laid a finger on me. I was verbally abused and also had problems with officers and NCOs at times but nobody beat me up, like they did with other people."

Despite escaping violent attacks, Kersh could not avoid subtler forms of discrimination. "Antisemitism wasn't everywhere but it certainly existed and I had it from time to time," he says. "In Lancashire we were with another unit commanded by a sergeant major at a depot where they were teaching us. I found I was on duty – including fire pickets – wandering around the camp keeping an eye open. I did this night after night, weekend after weekend, and really had no time off.

"I challenged the sergeant major one time and asked why it was always me doing the duties but he just said, 'I have to count the 30th, 20th or 15th soldier out of the door for duty and it always seems to be you.' That obviously wasn't a coincidence but I couldn't argue and call him a liar because he was the sergeant major. I was very demoralised at that stage and really in a bad state. Because of the war, I decided not to desert and so I carried on and put up with it."

US
21
VIRGIN

USS LST-21 unloads British tanks and trucks on a Normandy beach, 6 June 1944

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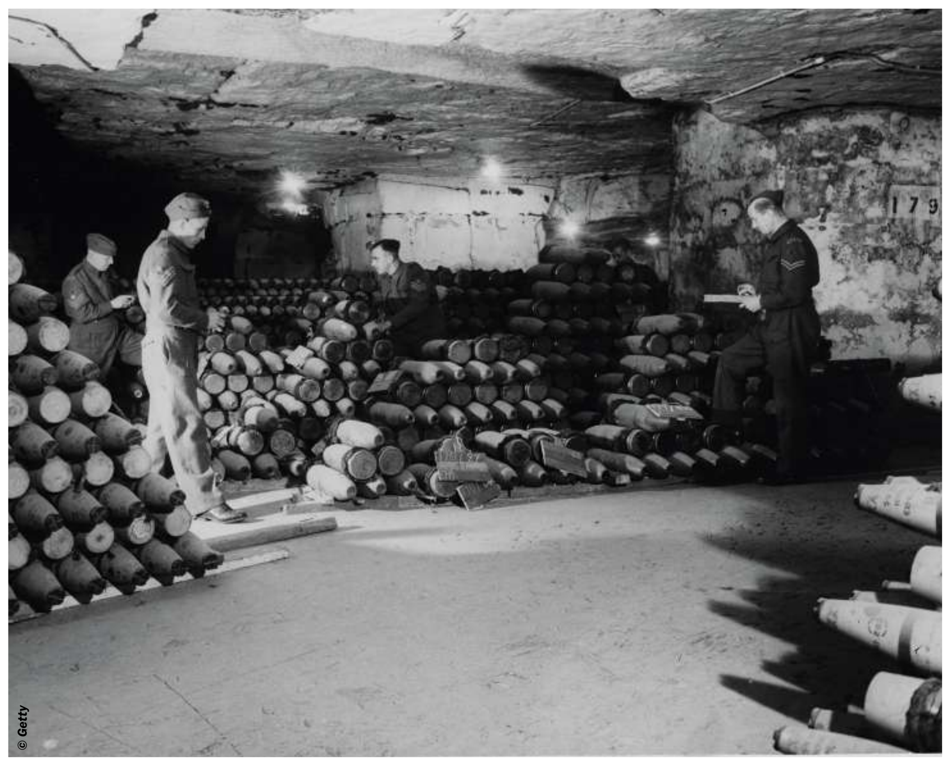
ROYAL ARMY ORDNANCE CORPS

The British Army's supply and repair corps had origins dating back to the 15th century and undertook many logistical roles alongside its main task of issuing ammunition

Tasked with supplying weapons, ammunition and equipment to the British Army, the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC) had medieval origins. First set up as the "Office of Ordnance" in 1414 during the reign of Henry V, Britain's system of logistical supplies went through various incarnations before it became the RAOC in 1918. The importance of artillery during WWI had vastly increased the role and numbers of ordnance personnel and the RAOC was given its "Royal" prefix in 1922.

The RAOC were initially responsible for ammunition, clothing and other general surplus but their remit began to include army vehicles during the 1930s. Unlike other corps, the RAOC was divided into companies rather than battalions before 1945 and became famous for its bomb disposal work during WWII. The demands of the war meant that its personnel numbers grew from a few thousand officers and men to 130,000 in just four years. The RAOC's responsibility for equipment and vehicle repairs was largely transferred to the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) in 1942. However, vehicle storage (which was Kersh's job) was a task that was transferred over from the Royal Army Service Corps (RASC).

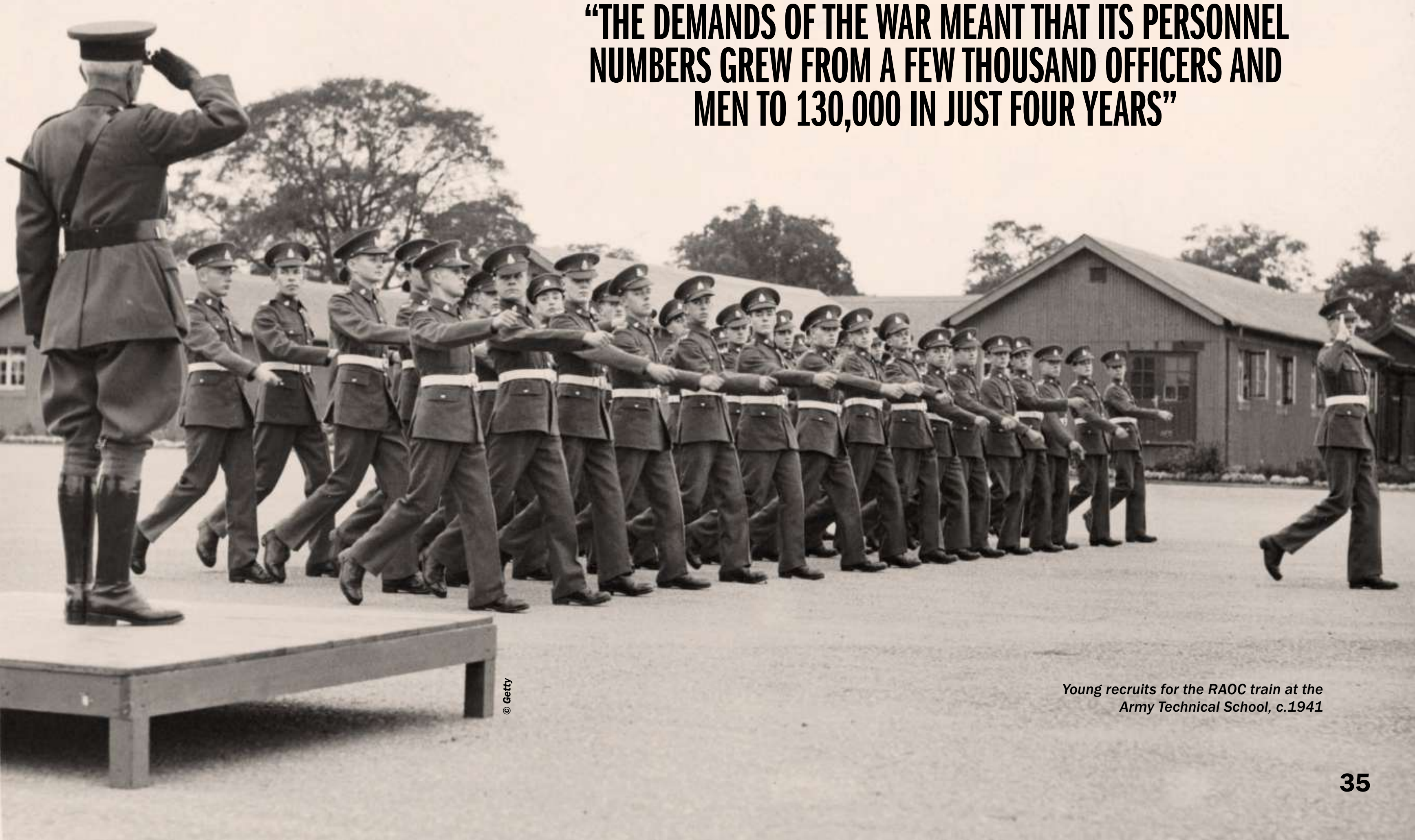
After WWII, the RAOC took over the RASC's supply role in 1965 and largely undertook bomb disposal duties during the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland as well as the Falkland and Gulf Wars. It was eventually merged with the Catering, Pioneer and Transport Corps to form the Royal Logistics Corps in 1993.



Soldiers check the issue of six-inch shells in one of the huge bays of the RAOC's underground arsenal, May 1944

© Getty

> "THE DEMANDS OF THE WAR MEANT THAT ITS PERSONNEL NUMBERS GREW FROM A FEW THOUSAND OFFICERS AND MEN TO 130,000 IN JUST FOUR YEARS"



Young recruits for the RAOC train at the Army Technical School, c.1941

© Getty

Preparing for Normandy

Now assigned to the RAOC's vehicle companies, Kersh's job was logistical work in army vehicle parks. "We had to see that units at the front had every vehicle that they wanted and where they wanted it. We made sure that no unit would be short of vehicles of any sort from British depots. There were hundreds of different types, from Sovereign bicycles to 48-wheel tank transporters. I learned to drive by driving around in those."

From December 1943, Kersh and his comrades began making preparations for what turned out to be Operation Overlord. "We were forming a new unit within another unit to get organised. People joined us all the time and we were getting to know how to work in practice and not just theory. We did this knowing we were going to be in the 'Second Front', wherever that was. In December 1943 nobody knew where although we gradually moved further south as a frontline unit. We ended up not far from Brighton where we were briefed, although apparently not everyone was. We were told where we were going, not the location, but relative to other units."

Kersh's unit had formed into the RAOC's 17th Advance Vehicle Company as part of 17 Advance Ordnance Depot (17 AOD). With plans to land on Gold Beach on D-Day+5, 17 AOD was given new equipment. "We were kitted out with everything we needed and things we didn't need such as a French phrase book. It gave us lovely questions but nobody told us how to understand the answers! Some of the questions were also irrelevant, things like asking where the museum was, because it was a pre-war travel book.

"We also got emergency rations, which were a marvel and included water purifiers and a little folding cooker with matches. One of the things was a tin of vegetable soup that heated automatically when you opened it. I thought it was a marvellous idea that would take off after the war but I've never heard of it since. You additionally received a big bar of white chocolate that was so hard you couldn't bite or break it. All you could do was lick it, which of course made it very messy."

Kersh almost got into trouble with his superiors because of the rations. "When we got to Gosport I was arrested for not eating any meat in the rations. An outside infantry officer came in and charged me with trying to make myself unfit for service overseas. I explained that I didn't eat meat, was eating all I needed and that I intended to go. The meat wasn't kosher and I normally lived quite happily on vegetables, milk and cheese. It didn't bother me or my brother when we were in the forces – I was very dark and thin but fit as a fiddle."

Although 17 AOD were supposed to sail to Normandy on D-Day+5 their deployment was moved forward because of a tragic incident at sea. "We had an advance recce party under Colonel Gore who were going on D-Day+2.

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LIBERATION ROUTE EUROPE

Liberation Route Europe is a remembrance trail and foundation. It works with government organisations, universities, museums, veterans' societies and tourism organisations in Western Europe and Poland to bring together national perspectives on the liberation of Europe during WWII. Through shared experiences and understanding, the foundation commemorates WWII in order to create a unified awareness of the importance of freedom.

For more information on its aims and activities visit: www.liberationroute.com

Two Allied soldiers gaze across a decimated and rubble-filled cityscape during the campaign to liberate Caen

© Getty

When they left us we knew D-Day was about to begin or had already begun. We moved off that day down to Gosport and it was very moving going down with people waving and shouting 'God bless you!' and that sort of thing.

"Colonel Gore suddenly appeared and told us what he was doing in England after he'd already gone to France. The advance party were on the only boat that was sunk that day. It had been torpedoed and they were all killed except for Gore because he was on deck and was thrown into the sea. He managed to get back to England and asked for replacements. That's why we went on D-Day+3 as opposed to D-Day+5."

"Get ready"

Under these inauspicious circumstances, Kersh sailed for Normandy on the night of 8-9 June 1944 on a 14-hour voyage. "I didn't know where I was apart from that I knew I was on a boat," he says. "At dawn, a sailor woke me up and told me, 'Get ready and have something to eat because you might not get any more for a while.' I then saw the other vessels around me, which I hadn't known had been there all the time. The sea was solid with boats and it was an amazing feeling to see so many of them, with the big ships in the distance. They were firing inland and the Germans appeared to be firing back at them.

> **"THE SEA WAS SOLID WITH BOATS AND IT WAS AN AMAZING FEELING TO SEE SO MANY OF THEM WITH THE BIG SHIPS IN THE DISTANCE"**

"This didn't bother me as we got closer and I didn't really feel any fear until we got quite close [to the beach]. Then I realised, 'What's going to happen when I land?' I was in a tracked vehicle and didn't even get wet when we landed. I didn't know which sector or beach it was because we went at such short notice."

Kersh remains unsure which beach he landed on but 17 AOD quickly met the local population. "We went up the beach to the top of a cliff and were greeted by French people with drinks, kisses and flowers. We were told to move on because there were other people behind us so we went on. The next thing I remember is that I was in a three-tonne lorry and not in the tracked personnel carrier, although I don't know when I changed vehicles."

The company's immediate task was to find a suitable place for use as a vehicle park. They soon found an ideal location: "It was a chateau with huge grounds for 1,000 vehicles, which is what we were looking for. It turned out to be the 21st Panzer Division headquarters! The engineers were going through the building,

German soldiers surrender to Allied troops at Ravenoville on 9 June 1944, the same day that Mervyn Kersh landed in Normandy

AJEX
The Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women supports the Armed Forces Jewish Community. It ensures that the immense contribution of British Jewish veterans is not forgotten through its three pillars of Welfare, Remembrance and Education. For more information visit: www.ajex.org.uk
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including toilets, piano stalls and artificial books, to look for small bombs. We had to wait while the engineers cleared all that and as soon as we got in I put up a requisition noticeboard."

Kersh's plan was immediately undone by a superior officer. "An infantry colonel then drove up and asked what I was doing there. I told him I had requisitioned the chateau for Colonel Gore. He asked, 'Is the colonel here?' and I said, 'He'll be here in a minute, sir.' He said, 'He's not here now. I'm here, I'm a colonel, you're a private – get!' So that was it, we had to start looking for somewhere else although we couldn't find anything. We found a ditch instead!"

17 AOD eventually found a suitable vehicle park and were heavily engaged in supplying the frontline troops. "My colleague Jack Cotter sorted the vehicles coming in on the beach and later on the Mulberry harbour, which I never saw. He sent them on to me and I saw that they were parked and passed on to anyone who wanted them. It was a busy time and there were no limits on the hours or days."

Despite working in logistics, Kersh was close to the front line. "You could hear the battles going on, including shells bursting. We didn't know which way they were going – you could hear the shells but couldn't see them. There would be a whining overhead and then a 'Klomph!' They were fired from both directions but we had the infantrymen coming back asking to replace vehicles of all sorts. I never had to say that we hadn't got one."

Kersh was also lucky that the Luftwaffe bombed other Allied targets. "German planes didn't dare come over in daylight but when they flew at night they made for the beaches. They machine gunned and bombed the boats because they were coming in for weeks on end. Luckily, they didn't bother to bomb us, which was very good because I wouldn't be talking now!"

Respite at Bayeux

Among the chaos, Kersh witnessed the devastating Allied bombing of Caen during 8-9 July 1944. "I was able to see the bombing from a few miles away. You could see the planes coming in the sky and I've never seen so many aircraft at one time since. When the bombs came down they looked like heavy rain or snowflakes – it was as thick as that. Of course, when we tried to get through Caen afterwards we couldn't because of the damage and rubble. We had to go around it in the end. It was a shame that a French city had been bombed rather than just removing the Germans."

> "WHEN THE BOMBS CAME DOWN THEY LOOKED LIKE HEAVY RAIN OR SNOWFLAKES – IT WAS AS THICK AS THAT"

17 AOD continued to supply vehicles in Normandy for the next few months, and during some rare time off in early September 1944 Kersh attended a Jewish service in Bayeux for Rosh Hashanah. The celebration of the Jewish New Year was symbolic, especially because the town was the first to be liberated. "A notice went up asking any Jewish personnel to attend a service if they were free. I made myself free and went, although it was a three mile walk. We had been going through thick mud due to the heavy rains of July and then it got very hot. The ground had turned to powder so as you walked clouds of white dust went up. It was like walking through the sea and when I got to Bayeux I was completely white! At the service were about 200 personnel: Americans, Canadians, British and others. I must say that the military services I attended were very moving and to the point. It was also a break for me, and a moving break at that."

During other breaks, Kersh interacted with civilians. "I used to go to the farms with a boy from Liverpool and we practised our schoolboy French. For my part, I went to buy milk and eggs, which I was living on. We forced ourselves to speak French to each other as well as the villagers and spent many hours with the local farmers. We both improved and were able to speak French accurately, although not fluently. It was many years later that I learned I spoke French in a provincial Normandy accent – it was similar to Geordie or Cockney!"

"Rampaging murderers"

Once the Allies broke out of Normandy, 17 AOD swiftly advanced across France. The French warmly welcomed their liberators. "They were very friendly and grateful. Wherever we went they put on parties and dances for us. These were free and I even had a girlfriend, although her mother used to walk about four or five yards behind us and we were never left alone."

The French jubilation reflected the terrible occupation they had endured. "I didn't think of the Germans as soldiers and still don't – they were rampaging murderers. If someone invades a country one after the other they're not soldiers but cowards. I heard from the French what the Germans had got up to. They weren't nice people and it was not just Hitler, it was millions of Germans. If individual Germans had been against invading, stealing from and killing other people they could have fired over their heads instead. Their soldiers fought with enthusiasm even when we were near Germany. When the Allies were crossing the Rhine they resisted and killed as many as they could – none of it was easy."

When 17 AOD entered Belgium, Kersh met Jews who had survived the German occupation.

Free French forces line up their Sherman tanks while waiting to go into action at Vesly, Normandy, 6 August 1944. Kersh worked in a huge vehicle park during the Normandy Campaign

29
MURIENNE

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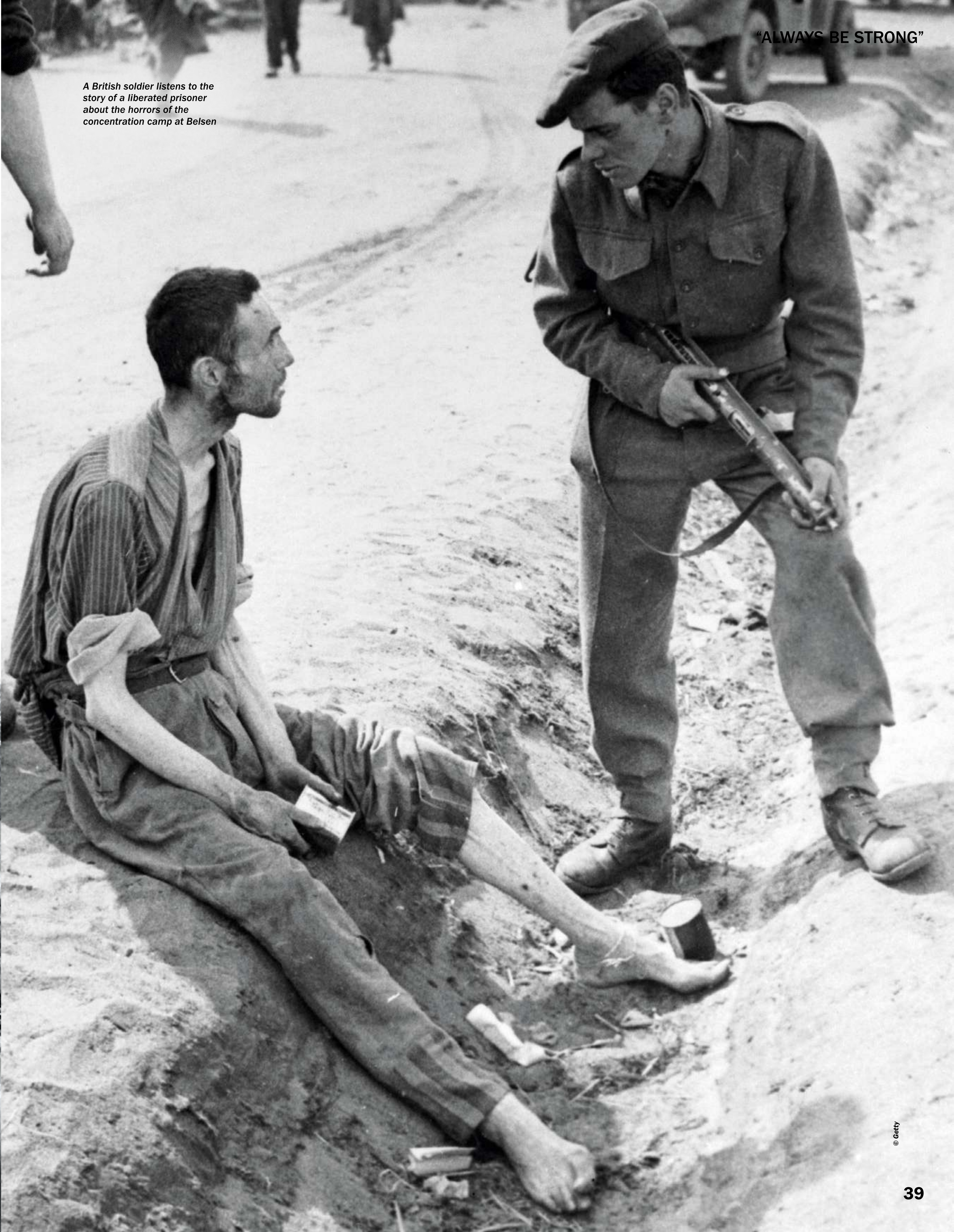


A British soldier listens to the story of a liberated prisoner about the horrors of the concentration camp at Belsen

© Getty

"I was about 20 miles from Antwerp when I saw a couple of Jews coming in who were dressed in traditional garb. I told them who I was and they were amazed because they didn't think there were any Jews left alive except them. They'd been hiding in a wardrobe most of the time and only very rarely came out for exercise. They'd been hidden in a non-Jewish home and had to share the rations of their hosts who were on tight rations as it was. However, they shared them with these two men and they survived."

After Belgium, 17 AOD advanced into the Netherlands and reached as far as Nijmegen during Operation Market Garden. By March 1945 they were ready to invade Germany, which Kersh recalls as a triumphant moment: "We went into Germany across the Rhine and that was beautiful. We went from being the 'British Liberation Army' that was liberating Europe to the 'British Army of the Rhine', which was occupying enemy territory."

Helping Belsen survivors

After entering Germany, Kersh developed an ear infection and was sent to a military hospital while his unit moved to Hamburg. On 21 April 1945 he was sent to Celle in Lower Saxony to a former SS barracks while he waited to be collected to re-join 17 AOD. While he was waiting at this holding unit he encountered liberated Polish slave labourers who were being fed by the British. "The Germans forced young Polish girls to go down Celle's salt mines without any protective clothing. They were covered in salt, burns and were as skinny as anything because they'd had very little food. They were in a terrible state and the Medical Corps had to take care of them."

The Polish slaves were just a prelude to what Kersh encountered shortly afterwards. Bergen-Belsen concentration camp had been liberated by British forces on 15 April 1945, and in early May Kersh encountered survivors at nearby Hanover Railway Station. "I ended up a few miles near Belsen, although I wasn't allowed in. This was a week after it had been liberated but the British started burning it down to stop a typhus epidemic. The people who were able to walk were coming out and they were hoping to get to Hanover Station, which was a central hub in Germany. They could meet up with people there and get some news about their families, neighbours and friends. They wanted to know about the outside world because they had been completely cut off. They didn't know what was going on or how the war was going. It was very, very moving."

Distressed by what he saw, Kersh attempted to feed the survivors with what he had available. "I gave them the chocolate I had and over the next few days I was giving them chocolate from my comrades. They were delighted and I thought it would be good for them. It was only much later that I learned that giving chocolate to people who had hardly eaten for years meant that their stomachs couldn't cope with it [but] I didn't know that at the time. I just saw the delighted faces of people who hadn't seen chocolate for years and I was also trying to get them other foods."

"I WAS PROBABLY THE LAST PERSON IN EUROPE TO KNOW THAT THE WAR WAS OVER!"

While he distributed food, Kersh also had many conversations. "I spoke to hundreds of survivors although I couldn't talk to them in detail because I didn't speak their languages. They were mostly Eastern European while one or two were from France or other Western countries. We had to find someone who could speak English, although I managed a few words here and there and used gestures more than anything.

"They wanted to talk about what they were going to do now the war was nearly over. They were all determined to go to Israel except one man who planned to go to South America. He wanted to marry a Catholic girl and have non-Jewish children so that they wouldn't have to go through what he had experienced."

Meeting the Belsen survivors reinforced Kersh's view that an independent Jewish state should be established. "It was very moving and made me more of a Zionist. It made me determined that we should have our own country that we could move to if we wanted to. It would be a refuge, which it has proved to be."

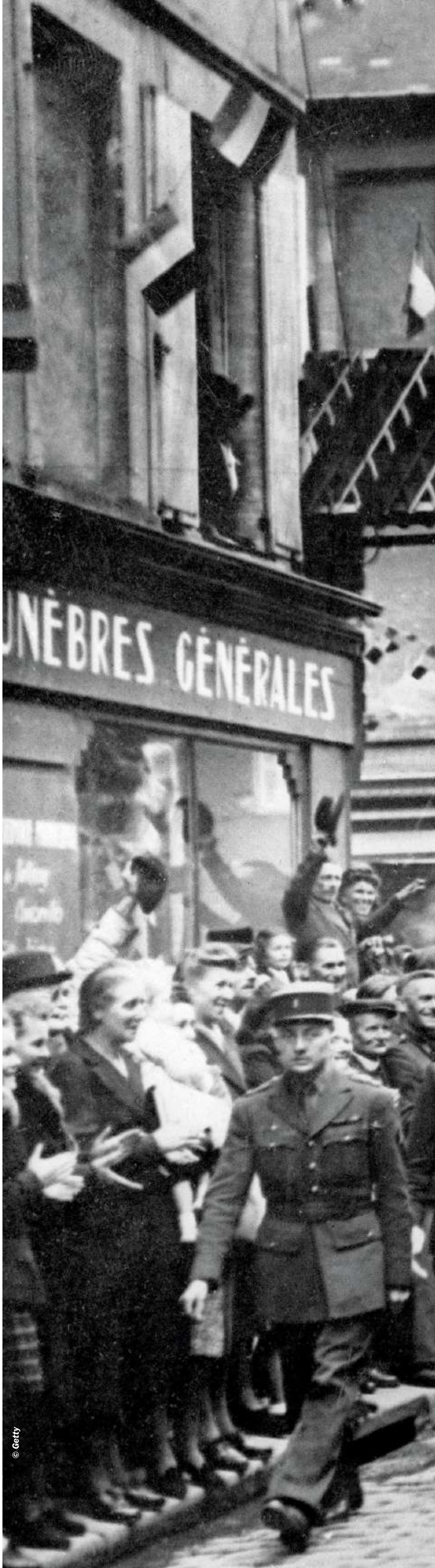
Having met liberated Jews across Western Europe, Kersh took great pride in defying the Nazis' antisemitism by provoking passing Germans. "I wore a little [Zionist flag] lapel badge and loved going up to the Germans, particularly soldiers who had lost their unit. They were trying to get home and I'd go up to them or columns of prisoners and say, 'I'm a Jew' and loved looking at their amazed faces. It was very satisfactory."

Kersh was meant to move on to Berlin after his time in Lower Saxony but received word from 17 AOD to return to Britain in preparation for deployment to the Far East. He was en route to Belgium when VE Day was declared on 8 May 1945. "The Far East wasn't my idea of fun but I got in a military train that was boarded up. I was in pitch darkness and there was nothing to do for 30 hours so I slept for most of the time. I had to change at Bruges and when I got out there I was told the war had ended the previous day. I was probably the last person in Europe to know that the war was over! It was definitely an anti-climax."

Raising awareness

The war against Japan ended before Kersh could be deployed and he instead spent six months serving in Egypt before he was demobbed in January 1947. He went on to mostly spend his career in the clothing industry as well being actively involved in AJEX – the Association for Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women. Now a recipient of the Légion d'honneur from the French government, Kersh also acts as an ambassador for several remembrance charities and frequently travels back to Normandy with school groups.

Speaking to schoolchildren and groups about his WWII experiences has been major part of Kersh's volunteering for the past five years and even the Covid-19 pandemic has not stopped his efforts. "I've been speaking to various schools, clubs and organisations for the last few years and more recently by



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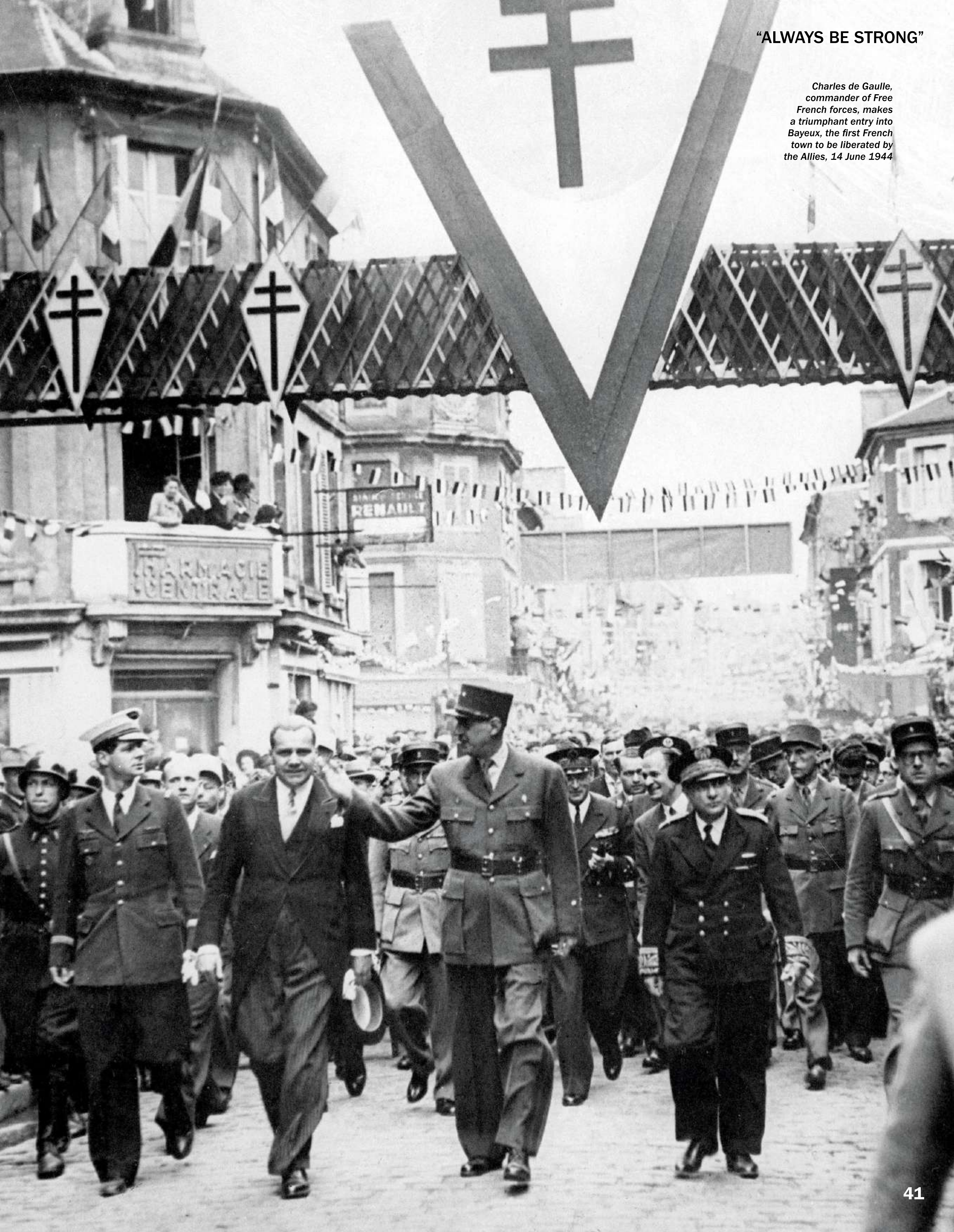

RENAULT
PHARMACIE
CENTRALE

Charles de Gaulle, commander of Free French forces, makes a triumphant entry into Bayeux, the first French town to be liberated by the Allies, 14 June 1944

Zoom to the Continent, including Belgium, the Netherlands, France and also the United States and Canada."

During his talks to children, Kersh emphasises that aggression should always be resisted. "My main message is: 'Always be strong.' Young people should be aware of how wars begin, which is often because bullies, like Nazi Germany, look for supposedly weak countries. Bullies only attack people they think are weak so people should remain strong, armed and ready at all times so that no one will attack you."

When Kersh makes return journeys to Normandy he is always mindful of how fortunate he was to survive. "I often go and am pleased to. I attend the services and when I go to the cemeteries I'm always relieved and moved. I'm able to come away and leave whereas unfortunately the other soldiers aren't who stay there."

REMEMBRANCE
YOU GAVE
YOUR LIFE
SO THAT
WE MAY
LIVE
IN
FREEDOM

Mervyn Kersh holds a Jewish Star of David Remembrance Cross as he attends a ceremony at Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial above Omaha Beach, 4 June 2019

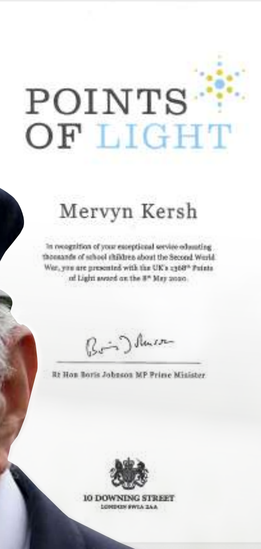
© Alamy

Despite the passage of time since Kersh advanced across Europe and saw the Holocaust first-hand, prejudice sadly still exists across the world. In Britain, antisemitism stained the reputation of the Labour Party when an investigation officially uncovered discrimination in October 2020 under the leadership of the then party leader Jeremy Corbyn. For a proud veteran such as Kersh, the findings were upsetting although he stresses that the majority of British people are not antisemitic. "I mix with a lot of non-Jewish people, mainly through veterans' organisations, and they all take me as I am – for me. I get on very well with non-Jewish people but obviously when Jeremy Corbyn came to power people had second thoughts about what was going to happen in this country. If he had become prime minister then I would have been inclined to move or leave the country."

A Point of Light

As part of the 75th anniversary commemorations for VE Day in May 2020, Kersh became the 1,368th recipient of the UK's Points of Light Award for his volunteer work. He received a personal letter from Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who remarked: "I am lost in admiration for your tireless efforts and delighted to hear that new technology has allowed you to continue your mission despite the coronavirus restrictions."

Kersh, who has previously met Johnson as well as other political leaders such as Theresa May, David Cameron and Ed Miliband, remains humble about his achievements: "It was very nice to receive the award. There was no money or property that came with it I'm afraid, no castles or anything like that! I just got a certificate, which is all I needed."



POINTS
OF LIGHT

Mervyn Kersh

In recognition of your exceptional service educating thousands of school children about the Second World War, you are presented with the UK's 1368th Points of Light award on the 8th May 2020.

Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP Prime Minister

10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Right: *Mervyn Kersh's Points of Light Certificate awarded by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on 8 May 2020*

VIGILANCE

BY MERVYN KERSH

It is good to remember how we felt in time of war;
To feel all the hatred for the misery and gore;
To relive our thoughts and feelings at the evil that we saw;
And still be determined to prevent it all once more.

Remembering, means we don't forget, and have not fought in vain;
Recalling what could once more be if we forgot the pain;
It means that we still heed the signs from some oppressive reign;
And keep our strength and will to fight, so we need not fight again.

This poem on war and remembrance is used with the author's kind permission

WORLD WAR II
1941 1945
VETERAN
1939-1945

Mervyn Kersh and American veteran Norman Duncan attend a remembrance ceremony at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer for the 75th anniversary commemorations of D-Day, 4 June 2019

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10 ICONS OF THE KOREAN AIR WAR

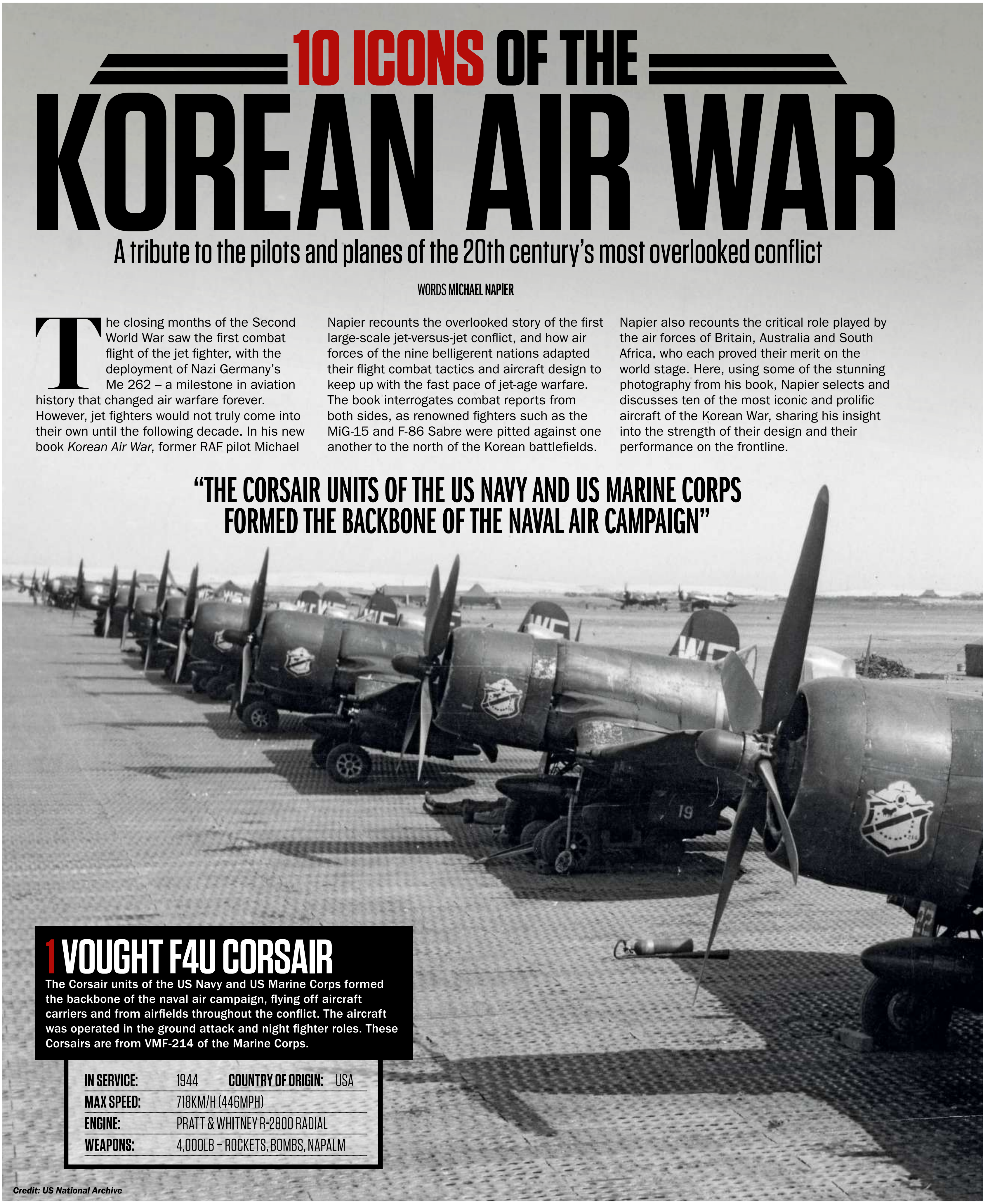
A tribute to the pilots and planes of the 20th century's most overlooked conflict

WORDS **MICHAEL NAPIER**

The closing months of the Second World War saw the first combat flight of the jet fighter, with the deployment of Nazi Germany's Me 262 – a milestone in aviation history that changed air warfare forever. However, jet fighters would not truly come into their own until the following decade. In his new book *Korean Air War*, former RAF pilot Michael Napier recounts the overlooked story of the first large-scale jet-versus-jet conflict, and how air forces of the nine belligerent nations adapted their flight combat tactics and aircraft design to keep up with the fast pace of jet-age warfare. The book interrogates combat reports from both sides, as renowned fighters such as the MiG-15 and F-86 Sabre were pitted against one another to the north of the Korean battlefields.

Napier also recounts the critical role played by the air forces of Britain, Australia and South Africa, who each proved their merit on the world stage. Here, using some of the stunning photography from his book, Napier selects and discusses ten of the most iconic and prolific aircraft of the Korean War, sharing his insight into the strength of their design and their performance on the frontline.

> "THE CORSAIR UNITS OF THE US NAVY AND US MARINE CORPS FORMED THE BACKBONE OF THE NAVAL AIR CAMPAIGN"



Credit: US National Archive

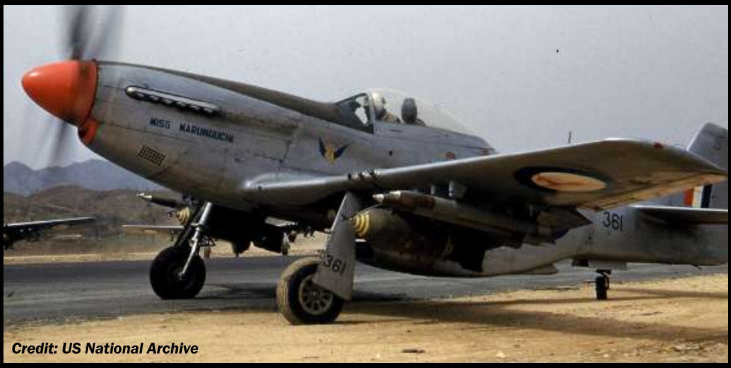
1 VOUGHT F4U CORSAIR

The Corsair units of the US Navy and US Marine Corps formed the backbone of the naval air campaign, flying off aircraft carriers and from airfields throughout the conflict. The aircraft was operated in the ground attack and night fighter roles. These Corsairs are from VMF-214 of the Marine Corps.

IN SERVICE:	1944	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	718KM/H (446MPH)		
ENGINE:	PRATT & WHITNEY R-2800 RADIAL		
WEAPONS:	4,000LB – ROCKETS, BOMBS, NAPALM		

2 NORTH AMERICAN F-51 MUSTANG

The F-51 was operated by US, Australian, South African (as shown in this picture) and South Korean units in the ground attack role. In 1950 a number of USAF jet units were re-equipped with the F-51, which had better weapon-carrying capability and endurance than the early jet fighters. The Mustang remained in service with some air forces until the early 1980s.

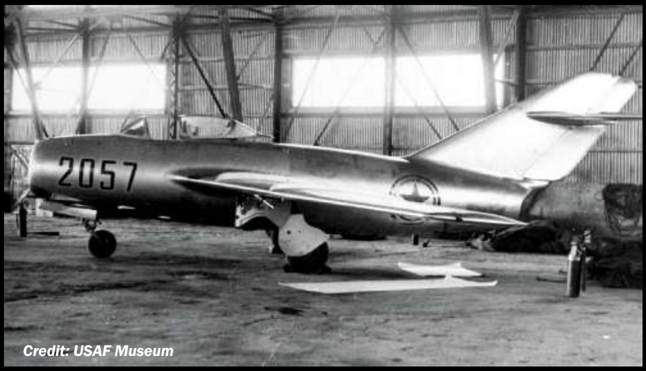


Credit: US National Archive

IN SERVICE:	1944	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	708KM/H (440MPH)		
ENGINE:	PACKARD MERLIN LIQUID COOLED		
WEAPONS:	1,000LB – ROCKETS, BOMBS, NAPALM		

3 MIKOYAN GUREVICH MIG-15

The MiG-15 equipped the Soviet, Chinese and North Korean air forces. Originally conceived as a 'bomber destroyer' rather than an air superiority fighter, it nevertheless outperformed the Sabre, particularly at high altitudes. However, its slow-firing cannon and the lack of 'G' protection for pilots proved to be tactical weaknesses.



Credit: USAF Museum

IN SERVICE:	1949	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USSR
MAX SPEED:	1001 KM/H (620MPH / MACH 0.9)		
ENGINE:	KLIMOV VK-1 JET		
WEAPONS:	2 X 23MM CANNON, 1 X 37MM CANNON		

WE
22
WE
63065

4 BOEING B-29 SUPERFORTRESS

The heaviest bomber of World War II, the B-29 was obsolete by the start of the Korean War, but it became the main means of conducting strategic airstrikes against North Korea. Eventually forced into night operations by the MiG-15, the B-29 continued bombing missions until the end of the conflict.

Credit: US National Archive

IN SERVICE:	1944	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	575KM/H (357MPH)		
ENGINE:	4 X WRIGHT R-3350 DUPLEX CYCLONE RADIAL		
WEAPONS:	12,000LB – BOMBS		

> “THE METEOR SOON PROVED ITS WORTH IN THE GROUND ATTACK ROLE, IN WHICH IT WAS PARTICULARLY EFFECTIVE AS A ROCKET-FIRING PLATFORM”

5 DOUGLAS AD SKYRAIDER

The impressive weapon load and range of the carrier-borne Skyraider strike aircraft made it a vitally important component of the naval air campaign throughout the conflict. Uniquely, Skyraiders from USS Princeton also carried out a successful torpedo attack against the Hwachon Dam in May 1951.

Credit: US Navy

IN SERVICE:	1946	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	518KM/H (322MPH)		
ENGINE:	WRIGHT R-3350 DUPLEX CYCLONE RADIAL		
WEAPONS:	8,000LB – ROCKETS, BOMBS, NAPALM		

6 GLOSTER METEOR F8

The RAAF procured the Meteor to re-equip 77 Squadron, which operated the F-51 in Korea until mid-1951. After a disastrous debut as an escort fighter, the Meteor soon proved its worth in the ground attack role, in which it was particularly effective as a rocket-firing platform.

IN SERVICE:	1949	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	BRITAIN
MAX SPEED:	966KM/H (600MPH / MACH 0.82)		
ENGINE:	2 X ROLLS ROYCE DERWENT JET		
WEAPONS:	16 X 60LB ROCKETS		

IN SERVICE:	1949	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	1001 KM/H (622MPH / MACH 0.81)		
ENGINE:	ALLISON J35 JET		
WEAPONS:	4,450LB – BOMBS, NAPALM		

7 REPUBLIC F-84 THUNDERJET

Unfortunately, the straight-wing F-84 was no match for the swept-wing MiG-15 in air-to-air combat and it was soon switched to the ground-attack role. More rugged and with better range than the F-80 Shooting Star, the F-84 became the mainstay of the USAF fighter-bomber units.

Credit: USAF Museum

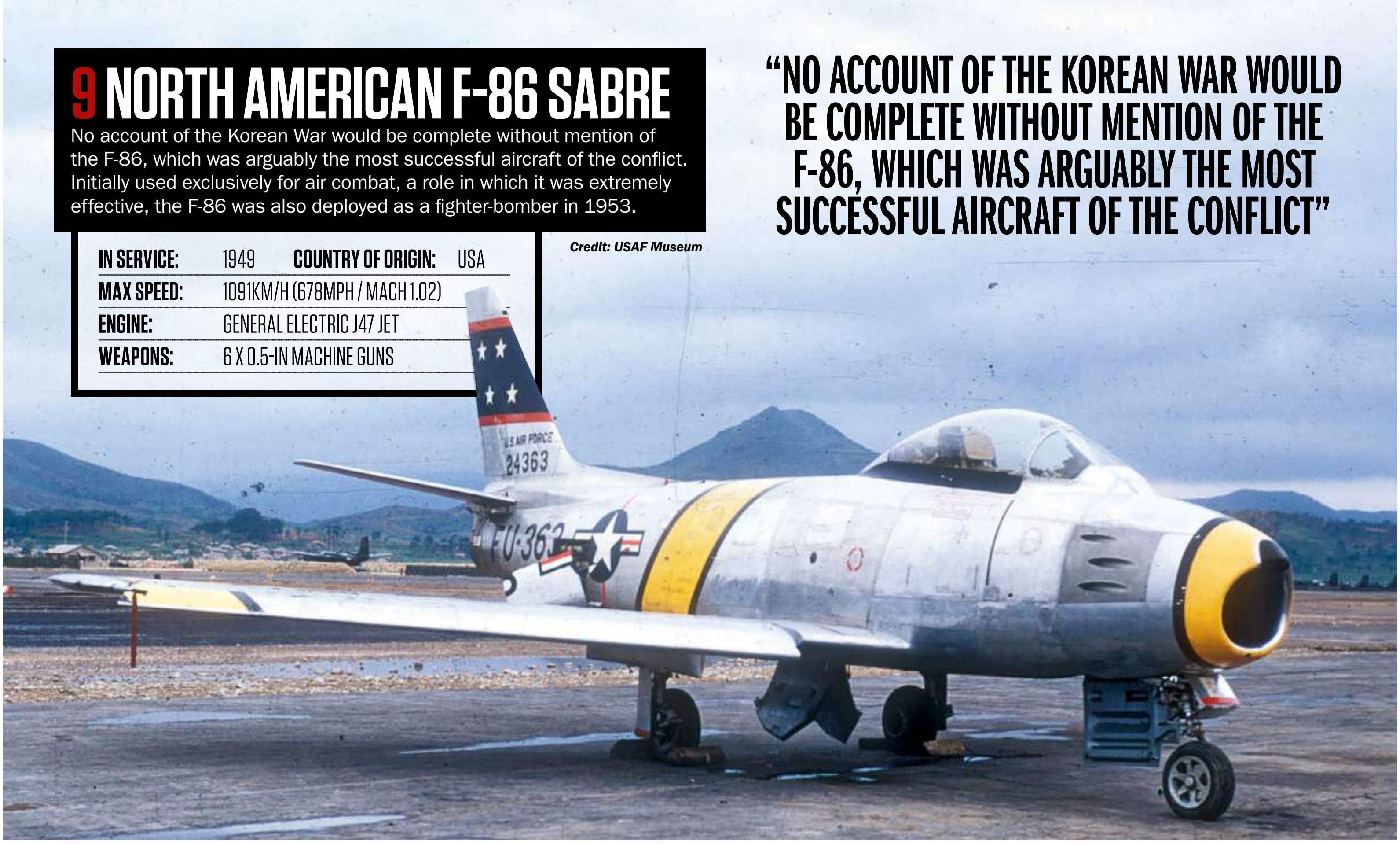
8 GRUMMAN F9F PANTHER

In 1950, the Panther was the prime air-defence fighter aboard US Navy aircraft carriers. In Korea the Panther enjoyed some successes against MiG-15s, but it was more often employed for ground attack missions. The US Marine Corps also operated a squadron of land-based Panther fighter-bombers in Korea.

Credit: US Navy

IN SERVICE:	1949	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	932KM/H (579MPH)		
ENGINE:	PRATT & WHITNEY J48 JET		
WEAPONS:	4 X 20MM CANNON		

Credit: State Library of Victoria



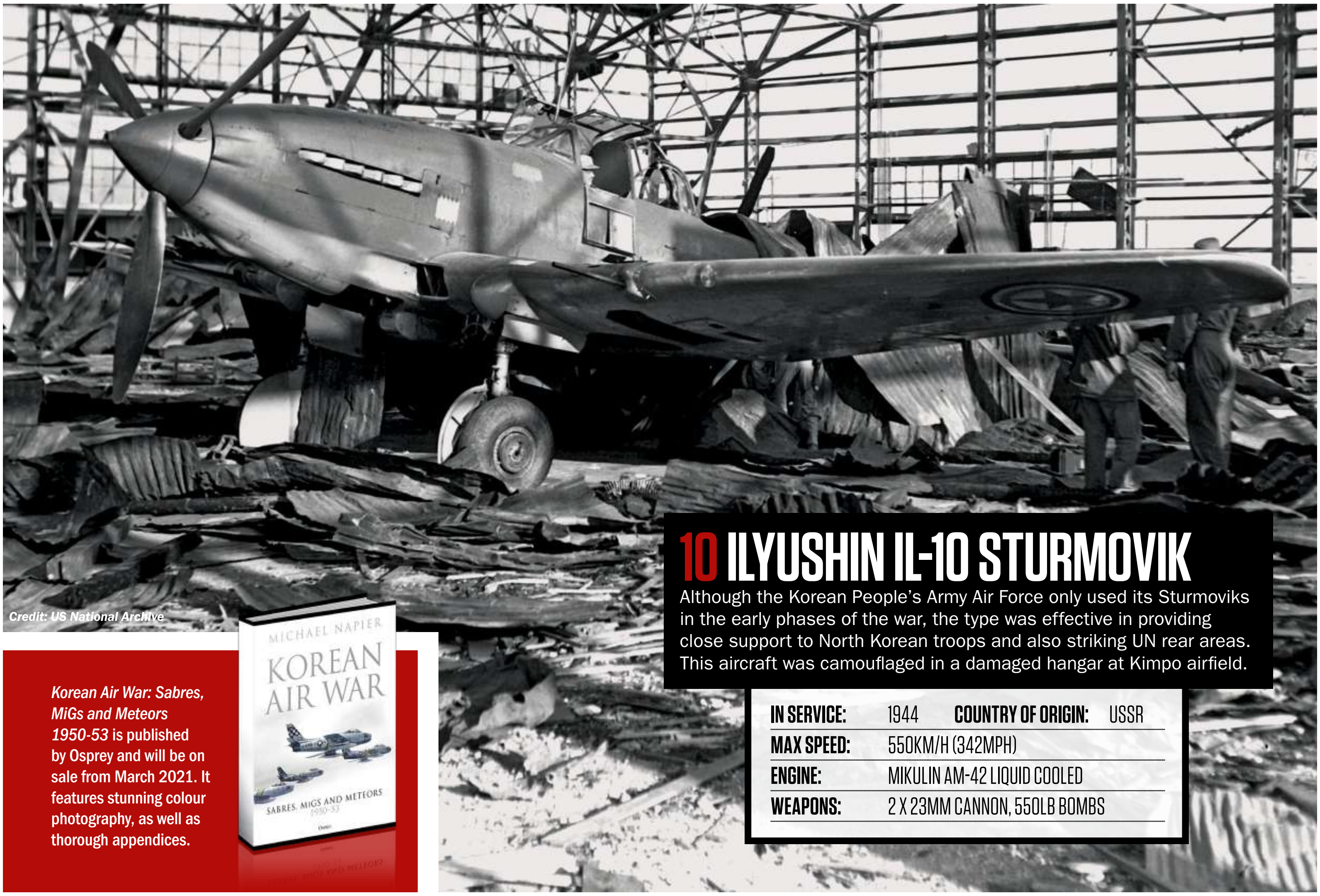
9 NORTH AMERICAN F-86 SABRE

No account of the Korean War would be complete without mention of the F-86, which was arguably the most successful aircraft of the conflict. Initially used exclusively for air combat, a role in which it was extremely effective, the F-86 was also deployed as a fighter-bomber in 1953.

IN SERVICE:	1949	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USA
MAX SPEED:	1091KM/H (678MPH / MACH 1.02)		
ENGINE:	GENERAL ELECTRIC J47 JET		
WEAPONS:	6 X 0.5-IN MACHINE GUNS		

Credit: USAF Museum

> “NO ACCOUNT OF THE KOREAN WAR WOULD BE COMPLETE WITHOUT MENTION OF THE F-86, WHICH WAS ARGUABLY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL AIRCRAFT OF THE CONFLICT”



Credit: US National Archive

10 ILYUSHIN IL-10 STURMOVIK

Although the Korean People’s Army Air Force only used its Sturmoviks in the early phases of the war, the type was effective in providing close support to North Korean troops and also striking UN rear areas. This aircraft was camouflaged in a damaged hangar at Kimpo airfield.

IN SERVICE:	1944	**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:**	USSR
MAX SPEED:	550KM/H (342MPH)		
ENGINE:	MIKULIN AM-42 LIQUID COOLED		
WEAPONS:	2 X 23MM CANNON, 550LB BOMBS		

Korean Air War: Sabres, MiGs and Meteors 1950-53 is published by Osprey and will be on sale from March 2021. It features stunning colour photography, as well as thorough appendices.

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ESSEX, ENGLAND 10 AUGUST 991

Great Battles

MALDON

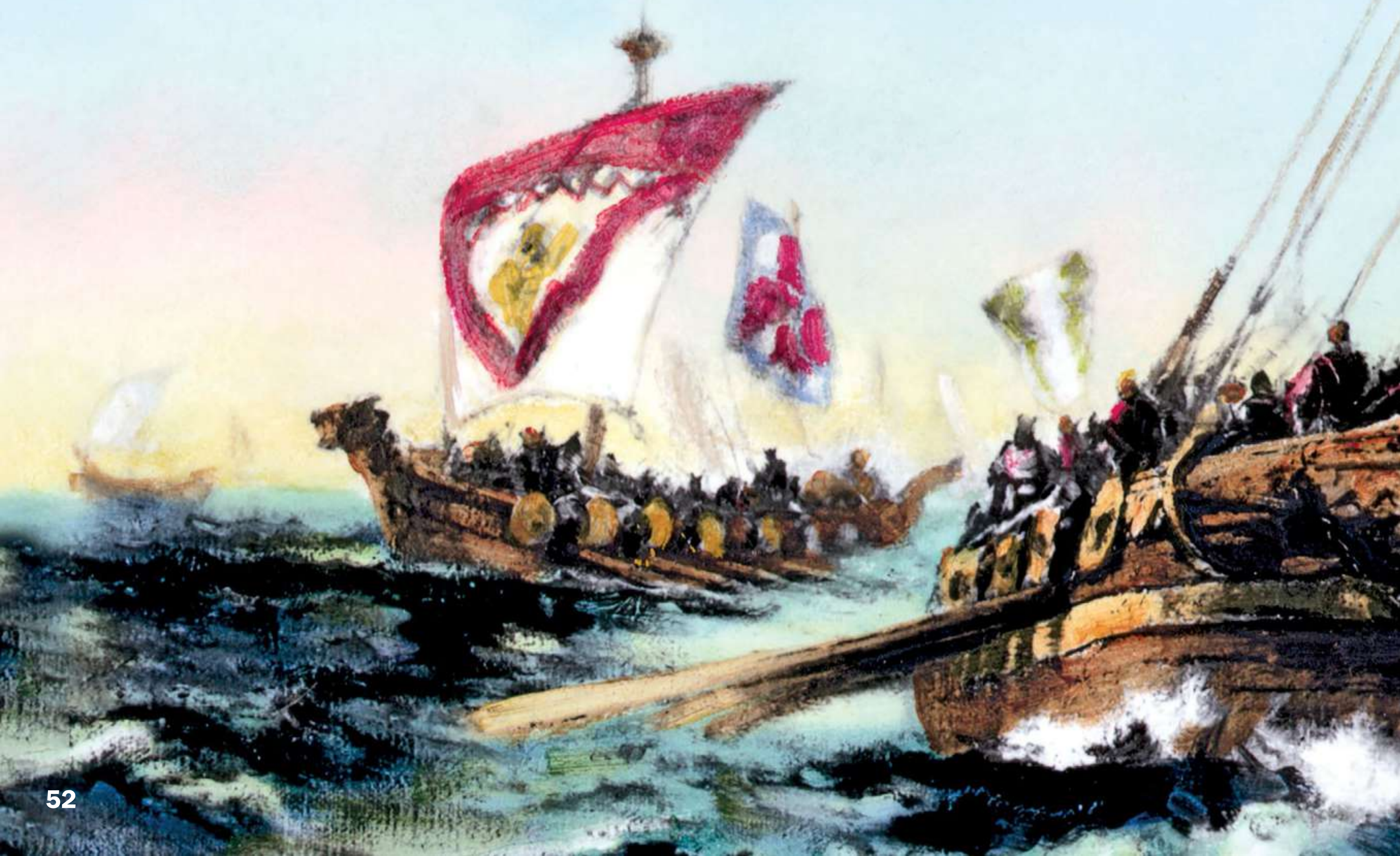
In 991, a marauding Viking army came up against fierce Anglo-Saxon resistance

WORDS **MURRAY DAHM**

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for the year 991, that summer, Olaf Tryggvason (later king of Norway) sailed with a fleet of 93 ships and raided the English coast. He began in Kent, raiding Folkestone and then Sandwich, and then moved on to Ipswich in Suffolk. After overrunning Ipswich, the fleet moved onwards to Maldon in Essex, sailing up the River Blackwater and establishing a base at the island of Northey in early August.

Northey was only accessible to the mainland via a tidal causeway and so was a safe harbour for the Vikings. Not that they needed to be overly wary: no one had opposed their raids so far. At Maldon, however, they faced opposition in the form of the Ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth, who gathered there with his retinue of huscarls (his heorthwerod or hearth-warriors) and the fyrd, the muster of able-bodied men of Essex required to serve in the army when called. Byrhtnoth brought this force together on the shore opposite the tidal causeway to Northey.

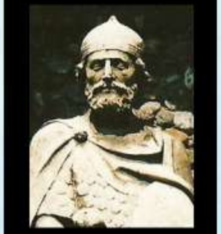
The Battle of Maldon is remarkable in the history of Anglo-Saxon and Viking warfare, indeed in the history of the Dark Ages, because we know so much about it. We have several sources that have come down to us, in particular an anonymous poem that survives almost complete and that must have been written close to the events of the battle. This fragmentary poem, known unsurprisingly as *The Battle Of Maldon*, is the best source we have on shieldwall warfare in the entire period. By reading the poem closely we can tell a great



“RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL OF ESSEX, IF BYRHTNOTH DID NOT FACE THE VIKING THREAT AT MALDON HE WOULD NEED TO SHADOW THEM AND CONFRONT THEM ELSEWHERE”

OPPOSING FORCES

ANGLO-SAXONS

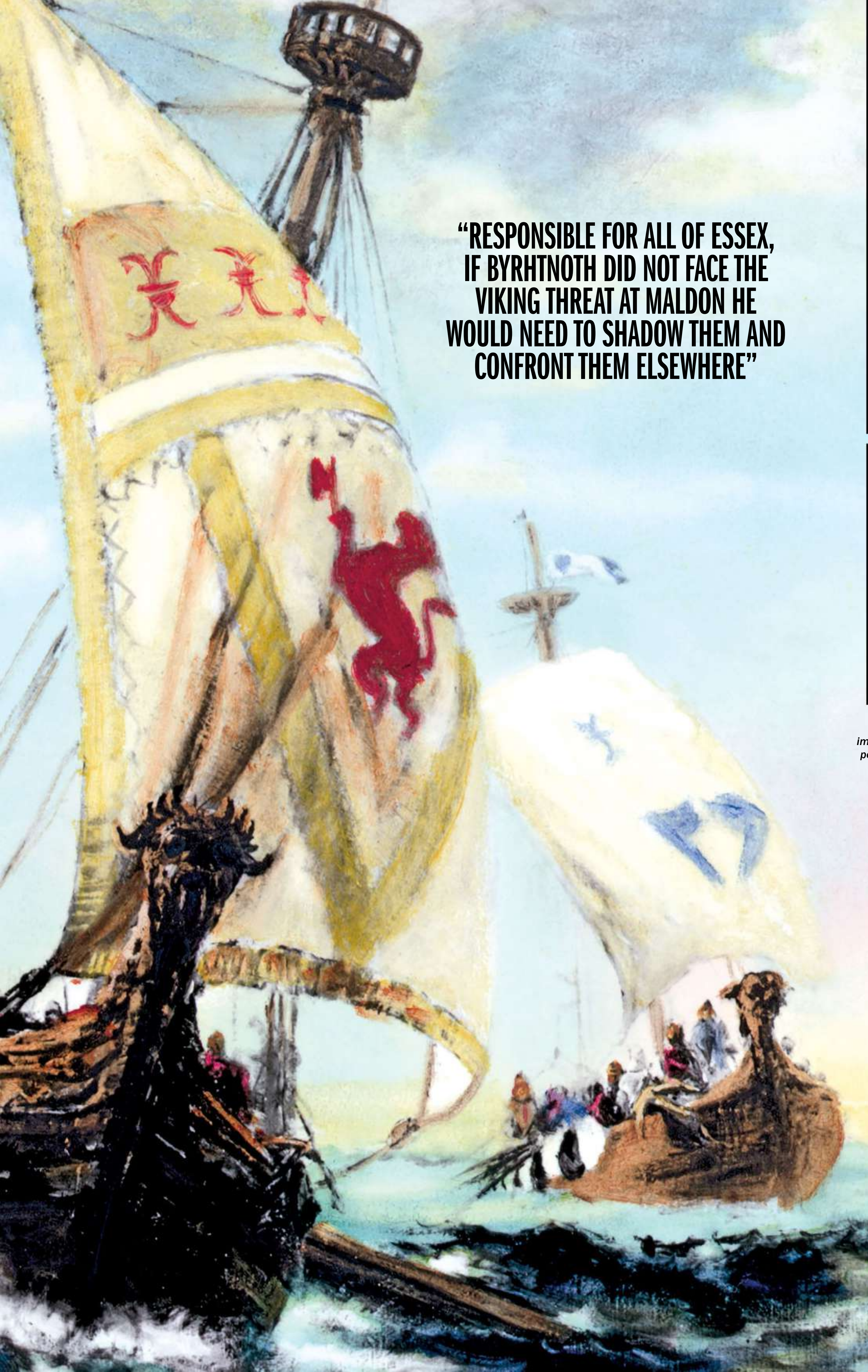


LEADER
Byrhtnoth

VS

VIKINGS

LEADER
Olaf Tryggvason



The epic encounter was immortalised in the famous poem The Battle of Maldon

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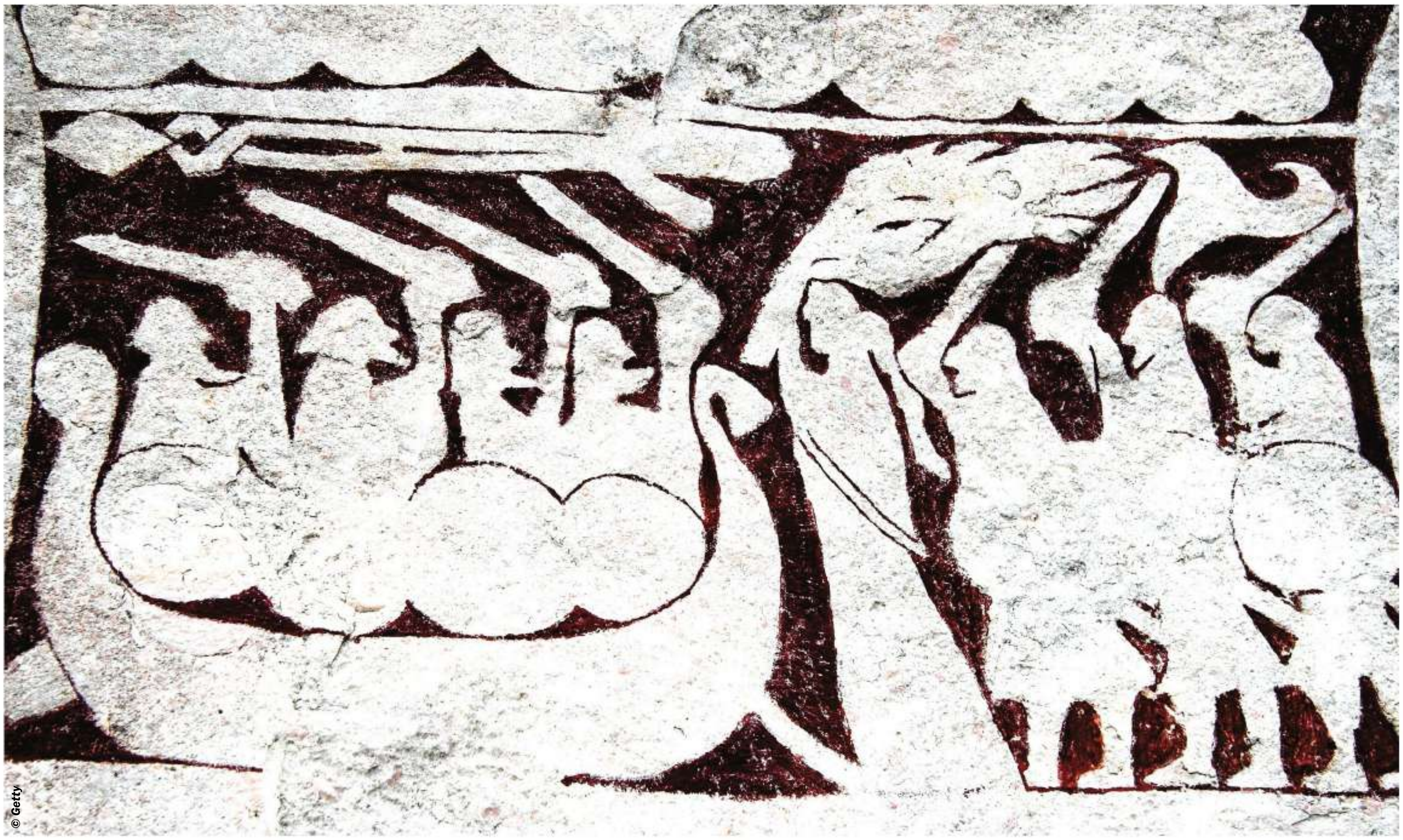


© Getty

***Above:** This runestone from Gotland, Sweden, perfectly captures the Viking raids and the fierce resistance they encountered at Maldon*

deal about what happened on the shores of the River Blackwater that August afternoon in 991. Of course, there are those who consider it to be a poetic exaggeration of the battle, and some even maintain it's a fictional account complete with speeches, heroes and villains. But the details of the poem, where we can corroborate them, are remarkably accurate and if we have no reason to reject the other details, we should not be so quick to reject the work as 'mere poetry'. The speeches may well reflect some of what was actually said on the day and add to the evocation of the battle, the mindset of the participants and contemporary feelings in the kingdom. The poem also includes several names of the warriors who fell in the battle, as well as criticism of the policy that was enacted soon after the battle by King Aethelred II of paying the Vikings not to ravage Anglo-Saxon lands. (These payments became known as Danegeld). In *The Battle Of Maldon*, a Viking demand for payment is met with scorn by Byrhtnoth before the battle is joined.

In the past, there has been much debate on the location of the battle and its other details, but the island of Northey, with its tidal causeway that perfectly fits the details of the poem, is where it took place. There has also been debate about Byrhtnoth's decision to fight. He could, of course, have allowed the Vikings to ravage Maldon (it was the site of a royal mint) and depart. Byrhtnoth is also criticised for actually fighting (the poem claims he was "tricked" by the Vikings into fighting). It is entirely possible that Byrhtnoth was outnumbered and so, the critics contend, what did he hope to achieve? Putting all that aside, the army had been mustered (a process that must have been begun some time before the Vikings reached Northey) and the decision to fight taken. Whatever its merits, Byrhtnoth followed that decision through to its terrible end. Byrhtnoth, as Ealdorman of Essex, was one of the most senior and important men in Aethelred's kingdom. He was approaching 60 and so could be counted as one of the king's senior advisers. Responsible for all of Essex, if he did not face the Viking threat at Maldon he would need to shadow them and confront them elsewhere.

"THE VIKINGS HAD IN EXCESS OF 3,500 MEN, ALL OF THEM EXPERIENCED, WELL-EQUIPPED AND BATTLE-HARDENED"

The army that Byrhtnoth brought together consisted of his own huscarl retinue of perhaps a few hundred warriors, all of whom would have been experienced and battle-hardened. Added to these were the fyrd of Essex (we also have evidence of men from as far afield as Northumbria in the army). These men would have been of varying quality and experience. The fyrd required that a certain number of men per area of land were obliged to fight. A hide was between 60 and 120 acres (15-30 modern acres), depending on the quality of the land, and if one man was provided by each hide this would have given Byrhtnoth 2,750 men (550 if there was only one man per five hides). We should not assume that Byrhtnoth had a general fyrd where every able-bodied man served. Facing them at Northey were the crews of the 93 Viking ships. If we assume an average crew of 40 men per ship, the Vikings had in excess of 3,500 men, all of them experienced, well-equipped and battle-hardened. Byrhtnoth dismounted and placed himself in the centre with his retinue. His horse was to be held close behind the Anglo-Saxon line. Most battles of this era were infantry-only affairs and men dismounted to fight; cavalry was used to pursue fleeing enemies or to ride to battle.

Byrhtnoth marched his army to the landward bank of the causeway to Northey, which in 991 was approximately 110 metres across (the distance is double that today). It still follows the path it did a millennia ago and it remains so narrow that only three men abreast can cross it. The deep muddy banks on either side are extremely treacherous and impassable. What's more, the path is completely submerged at high tide. Reconstructions of tidal patterns allow us to estimate that the battle was fought from approximately 4.30 in the afternoon of 10 August. When the two armies first faced one another, the tide was high. A Viking messenger came forward and demanded payment to make the Vikings go away. Byrhtnoth rejected this idea utterly and replied that the two sides would meet in battle. "We must decide between point and edge, grim war," he says in *The Battle Of Maldon*. Byrhtnoth's defiant words are taken as criticism of paying Danegeld, which was the policy that was followed soon after the battle. Byrhtnoth brought his army to the water's edge and there was an exchange of archery (something that's rarely emphasised in accounts of Viking-era warfare).

The Battle of Maldon took place on the shore and salt marshes opposite Northey Island in Essex

The tidal causeway leading to Northey Island. At high tide it is completely submerged

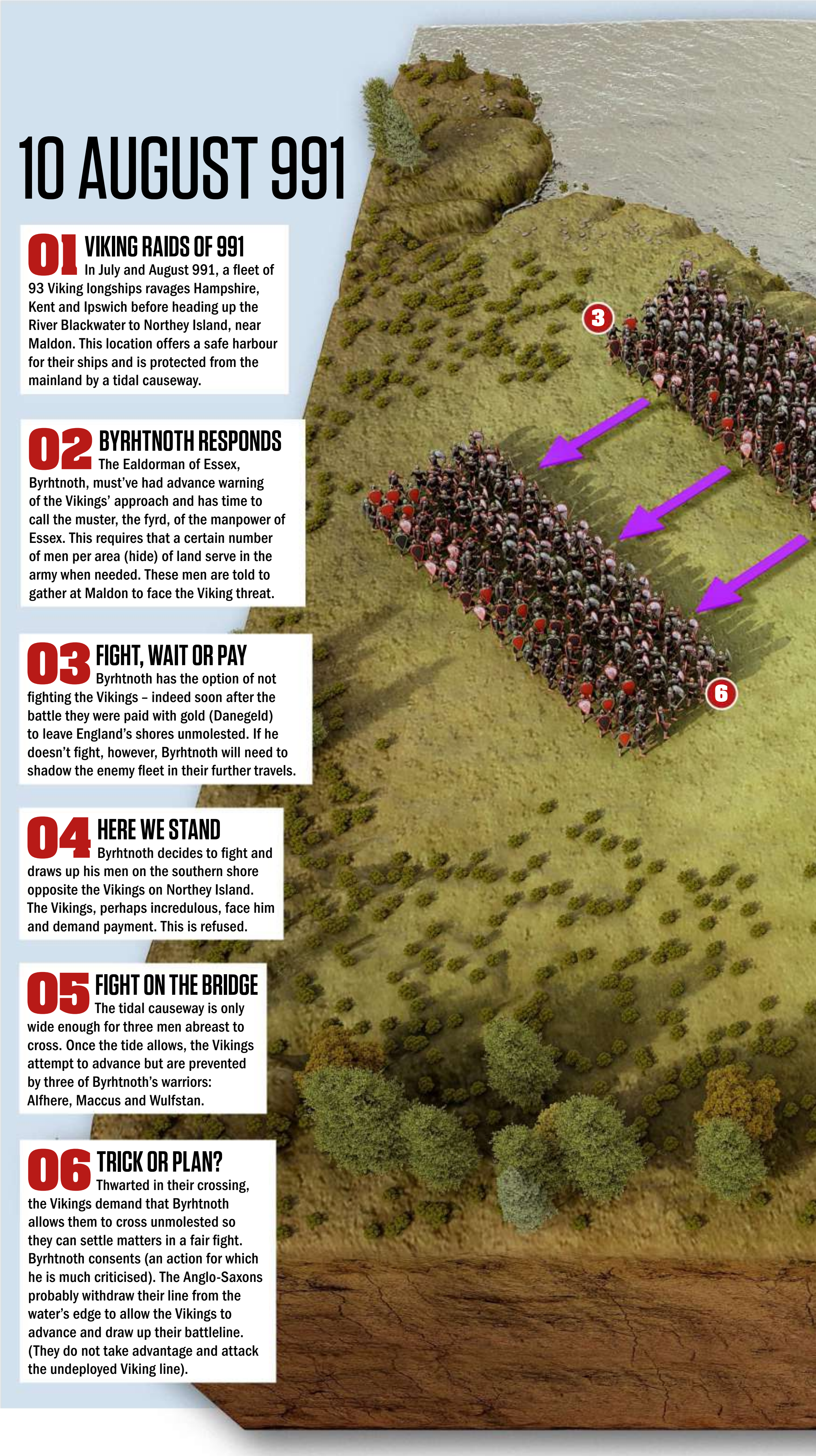
Images © Alamy

As the tide began to ebb, the Vikings started to cross the causeway. Byrhtnoth sent three men forward (named as Alfhere, Maccus and Wulfstan) to defend the causeway. Some historians are suspicious of this detail (it has echoes of Horatius and the bridge from Roman history), but looking at the causeway today it's easy to see how three determined men could prevent a much larger force from crossing.

At this point, the Vikings broke off and called out asking for safe passage across the water so they could cross over and face the men of Essex in a fair fight. The poet says that this was a trick ('lytegian' in Old English) by the Vikings. Byrhtnoth decided to grant their request and allowed them to cross. This was the critical decision of the battle and the result (and fate of England) hung on it. Byrhtnoth's choice is criticised by the poet (and has been by many historians since). The word the poet uses to explain Byrhtnoth's decision is 'ofermode', usually translated as 'overweening pride'. This is a stinging rebuke – the only other figure in Old English literature guilty of ofermode is the devil. As we have seen, however, the decision to fight the Vikings at Maldon had already been taken – the army was mustered and allowing the Vikings to cross and fight would settle the issue. If that decision was not taken they would sail away and the fight would be delayed until another day. Byrhtnoth must have thought he had a reasonable chance of success in a battle with the Vikings and this implies that the numbers on each side must have been close; perhaps the fleet had lost some ships, which had returned to Scandinavia.

The Anglo-Saxon army would have withdrawn from the water's edge to allow the Vikings to march across and form up, and the Anglo-Saxons didn't attack the Vikings before they were fully assembled. When the two armies were ready, the battle began. Both sides made their war-cries and advanced towards each other, each man's shield touching his neighbour's to make a wall of shields. Javelins were thrown and archers were busy behind the front lines, loosing their arrows into the enemy's ranks. In this initial encounter both sides were evenly matched. There followed a lull in the contact between the shieldwalls, and challenges for single combat were issued and accepted on each side. Byrhtnoth himself accepted a challenge and advanced towards

Below: *The tomb of Byrhtnoth in Ely Cathedral. His (decapitated) body was carried there and buried*



10 AUGUST 991

01 VIKING RAIDS OF 991

In July and August 991, a fleet of 93 Viking longships ravages Hampshire, Kent and Ipswich before heading up the River Blackwater to Northey Island, near Maldon. This location offers a safe harbour for their ships and is protected from the mainland by a tidal causeway.

02 BYRHTNOTH RESPONDS

The Ealdorman of Essex, Byrhtnoth, must've had advance warning of the Vikings' approach and has time to call the muster, the fyrd, of the manpower of Essex. This requires that a certain number of men per area (hide) of land serve in the army when needed. These men are told to gather at Maldon to face the Viking threat.

03 FIGHT, WAIT OR PAY

Byrhtnoth has the option of not fighting the Vikings – indeed soon after the battle they were paid with gold (Danegeld) to leave England's shores unmolested. If he doesn't fight, however, Byrhtnoth will need to shadow the enemy fleet in their further travels.

04 HERE WE STAND

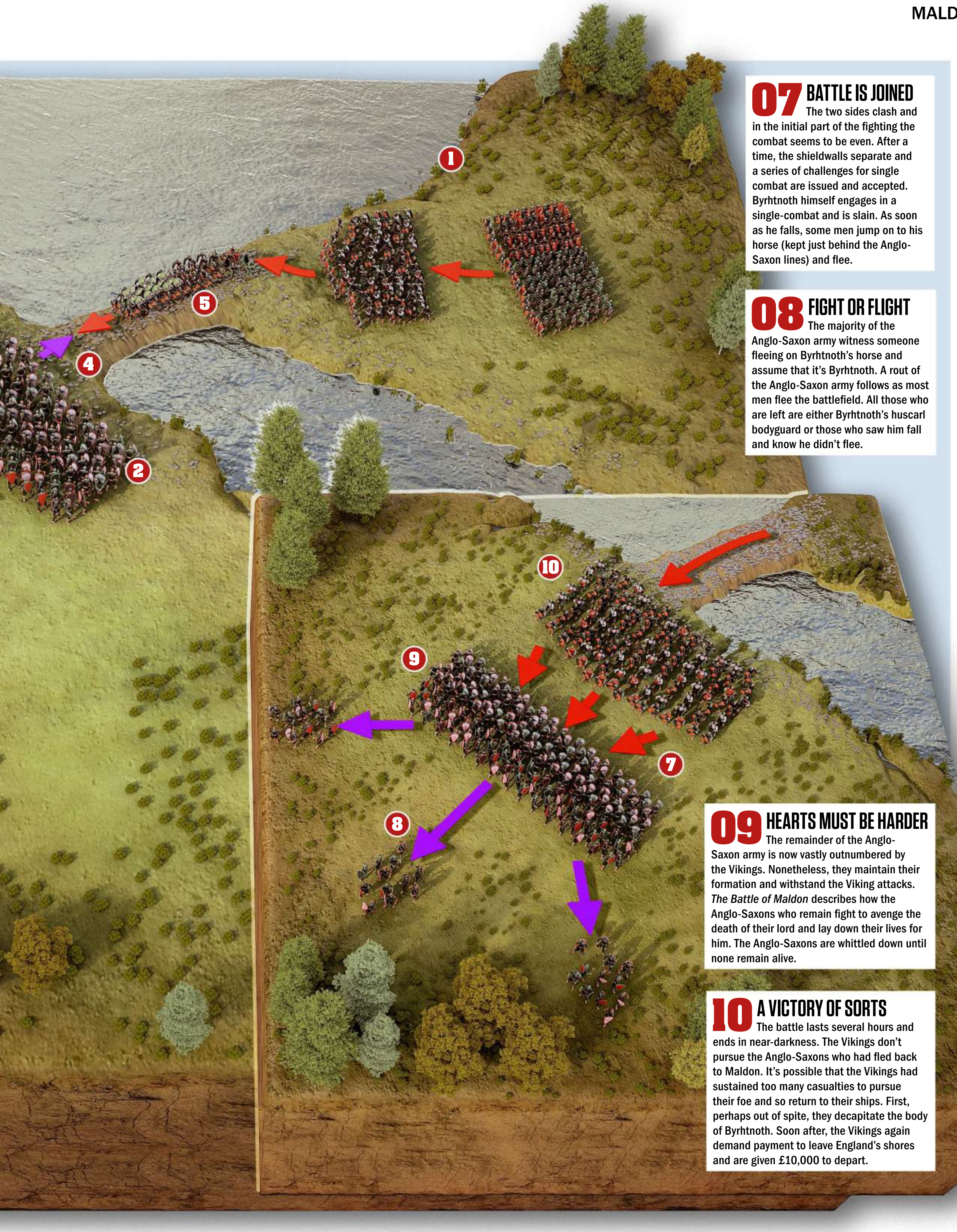
Byrhtnoth decides to fight and draws up his men on the southern shore opposite the Vikings on Northey Island. The Vikings, perhaps incredulous, face him and demand payment. This is refused.

05 FIGHT ON THE BRIDGE

The tidal causeway is only wide enough for three men abreast to cross. Once the tide allows, the Vikings attempt to advance but are prevented by three of Byrhtnoth's warriors: Alfhere, Maccus and Wulfstan.

06 TRICK OR PLAN?

Thwarted in their crossing, the Vikings demand that Byrhtnoth allows them to cross unmolested so they can settle matters in a fair fight. Byrhtnoth consents (an action for which he is much criticised). The Anglo-Saxons probably withdraw their line from the water's edge to allow the Vikings to advance and draw up their battleline. (They do not take advantage and attack the undeployed Viking line).



07 BATTLE IS JOINED

The two sides clash and in the initial part of the fighting the combat seems to be even. After a time, the shieldwalls separate and a series of challenges for single combat are issued and accepted. Byrhtnoth himself engages in a single-combat and is slain. As soon as he falls, some men jump on to his horse (kept just behind the Anglo-Saxon lines) and flee.

08 FIGHT OR FLIGHT

The majority of the Anglo-Saxon army witness someone fleeing on Byrhtnoth's horse and assume that it's Byrhtnoth. A rout of the Anglo-Saxon army follows as most men flee the battlefield. All those who are left are either Byrhtnoth's huscarl bodyguard or those who saw him fall and know he didn't flee.

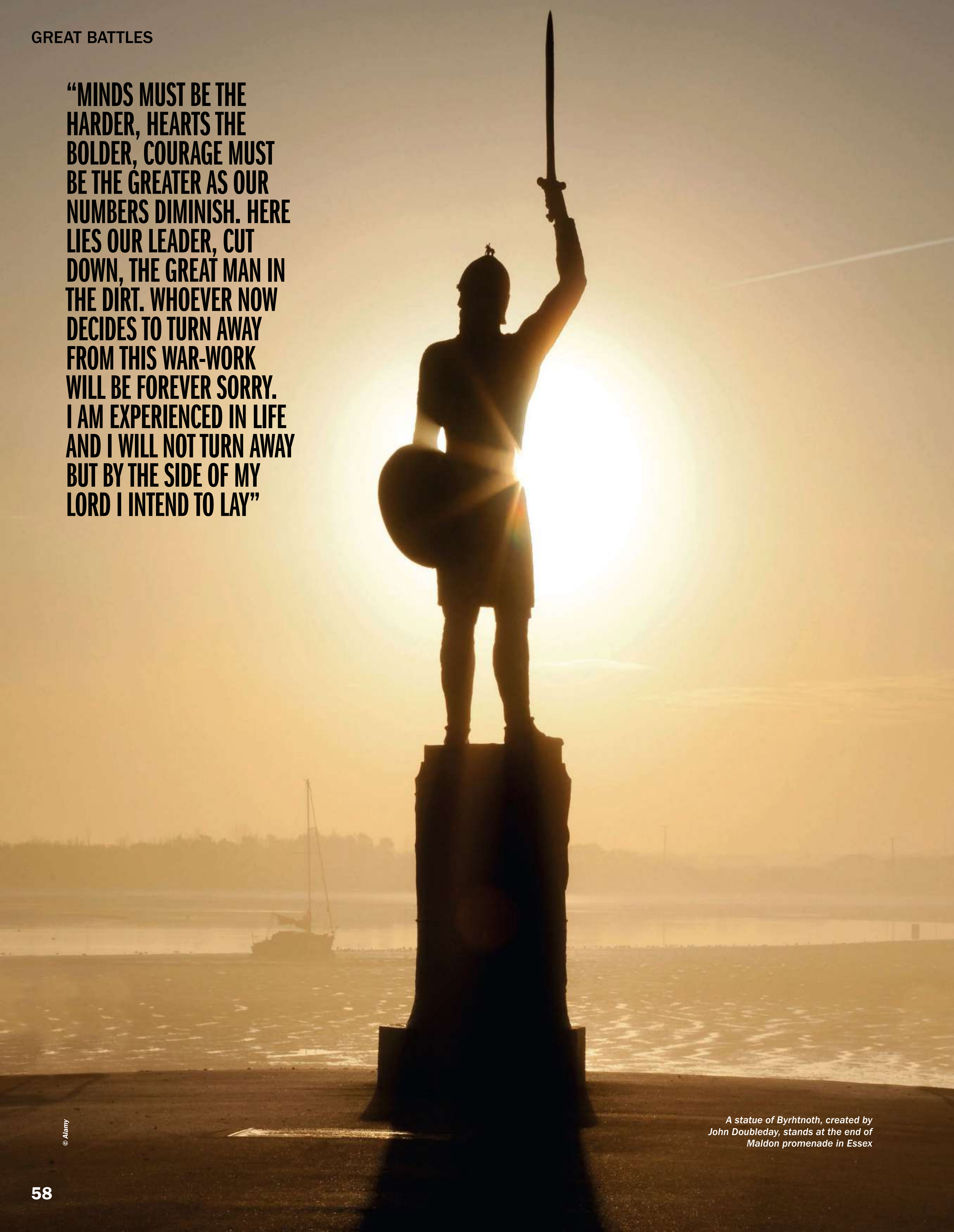
09 HEARTS MUST BE HARDER

The remainder of the Anglo-Saxon army is now vastly outnumbered by the Vikings. Nonetheless, they maintain their formation and withstand the Viking attacks. *The Battle of Maldon* describes how the Anglo-Saxons who remain fight to avenge the death of their lord and lay down their lives for him. The Anglo-Saxons are whittled down until none remain alive.

10 A VICTORY OF SORTS

The battle lasts several hours and ends in near-darkness. The Vikings don't pursue the Anglo-Saxons who had fled back to Maldon. It's possible that the Vikings had sustained too many casualties to pursue their foe and so return to their ships. First, perhaps out of spite, they decapitate the body of Byrhtnoth. Soon after, the Vikings again demand payment to leave England's shores and are given £10,000 to depart.

> “MINDS MUST BE THE HARDER, HEARTS THE BOLDER, COURAGE MUST BE THE GREATER AS OUR NUMBERS DIMINISH. HERE LIES OUR LEADER, CUT DOWN, THE GREAT MAN IN THE DIRT. WHOEVER NOW DECIDES TO TURN AWAY FROM THIS WAR-WORK WILL BE FOREVER SORRY. I AM EXPERIENCED IN LIFE AND I WILL NOT TURN AWAY BUT BY THE SIDE OF MY LORD I INTEND TO LAY”



A statue of Byrhtnoth, created by John Doubleday, stands at the end of Maldon promenade in Essex

© Alamy

According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a fleet of 93 Viking longships sailed up the River Blackwater to Maldon

© Getty

a Viking. What happened next decided the battle – and England's fate.

In a short exchange between Byrhtnoth and a companion and their Viking opponents, Byrhtnoth was killed. In the aftermath, three warriors – Godric and his two brothers, Godwine and Godwig – saw Byrhtnoth fall and fled the battlefield. Godric mounted Byrhtnoth's horse stationed behind the Anglo-Saxon line and rode off on it. This was witnessed by the remainder of the Anglo-Saxon army, who assumed that it was Byrhtnoth himself who was fleeing the battlefield. A general rout followed, with the majority of the Anglo-Saxon army fleeing the field. The only men who remained were those of Byrhtnoth's retinue and those who had seen their lord fall. According to the poem, the remaining men were determined that they would avenge Byrhtnoth's death or die trying. The outcome of the battle, however, was already decided. We do not know how long it took for the remainder of the Anglo-Saxon warriors to be cut down, but they maintained formation and continued to fight on, despite being vastly outnumbered. *The Battle Of Maldon* famously describes the battle's closing stages, in which each warrior makes a statement of intent before fighting to the death. One of their speeches (lines 312-319) has echoed down the ages:

"Minds must be the harder, hearts the bolder, courage must be the greater as our numbers diminish. Here lies our leader, cut down, the great man in the dirt. Whoever now decides to turn away from this war-work will be forever sorry. I am experienced in life and I will not turn away but by the side of my lord I intend to lay."

At this point the poem breaks off and we rely on other sources to tell us what happened, and one tale is that the Vikings hacked off Byrhtnoth's head. His decapitated body was later carried to Ely Abbey and buried there – a headless skeleton was discovered corroborating this story and his tomb can still be seen in Ely Cathedral. The Anglo-Saxons must have fought effectively since there is no record of Maldon being attacked or sacked in the battle's aftermath. It is possible that the Vikings had sustained enough casualties to make them reconsider continuing their raid (taking the head of Byrhtnoth may have been a sign of their frustration). Soon after, they demanded that King Aethelred pay them a Danegeld to ensure that they left England's shores unmolested. The fight had gone out of the kingdom and Aethelred agreed. The initial payment was £10,000 but the Vikings continued to make demands, and three years later the amount had jumped to £22,000.

Aethelred's epithet has long been 'the Unready', reflecting his payment of the Danegeld. In Old English, however, 'unraed' can also mean 'inexperienced' or 'ill-advised' and the latter meaning may be a reference to how Aethelred dealt with the Vikings. Byrhtnoth, one of Aethelred's senior statesmen, had been opposed to paying off the Vikings and his death was keenly felt. With Byrhtnoth dead Aethelred took what he saw as the only option to keep his kingdom at peace.

Heroes of the Medal of Honor

DESMOND DOSS

Running headlong into bullets and explosions at Hacksaw Ridge, this medic saved 75 lives, one-by-one, becoming the only soldier of World War II to earn a Medal of Honor without ever firing a gun

WORDS: **HARETH AL BUSTANI**

When the Empire of Japan launched its pre-emptive strike on Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941, a young Virginian called Desmond Doss was working at the Newport News shipyard. Though he was entitled to request a deferment, he felt a duty to serve his country and enlisted just months later.

It was an unusual move for a devoted member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, one who as a child had vowed never to kill. When Doss arrived at Camp Lee for training on 1 April 1943, a skinny vegetarian, his fervent beliefs immediately landed him in a world of trouble. While the other trainees perfected their marksmanship, he refused to even carry a weapon. This attitude infuriated Doss' fellow recruits to no end, with one even threatening, "Doss, as soon as we get into combat, I'll make sure you won't come back alive."

His commanding officers, too, believed a soldier without a gun was not only worthless, but a liability. Desperate to drive him out, they bullied and harassed him ruthlessly, even trying to have him discharged for mental illness. Defiantly, Doss told Captain Jack Glover: "Don't ever doubt my courage because I will be right by your side saving life while you take life," to which Glover replied, "You're not going to be by my damn side if you don't have a gun."

Although the Fourth Commandment required him to honour the Sabbath, Doss believed that serving as a medic would allow him to work all week, as "Christ healed on the Sabbath".

© Getty

Above: Refusing to even hold a gun, Doss instead served a crucial role rescuing his fellow soldiers, under the most dangerous circumstances

After the successful August 1942 landing at Guadalcanal, in the southwest Pacific, the Allies spent the next two years slowly reclaiming territory from the Japanese – with one army roping through the Solomon Islands and New Guinea, into the Philippines, and a second across the Central Pacific Ocean, sweeping the Marshalls and then seizing the Marianas and Guam in the summer of 1944.

Doss served in Guam, and then the Philippines, with the 307th Infantry Regiment, 77th Infantry Division. Although he initially struck his comrades as puritanical, he soon won them over with his selflessness and devotion to duty. In the thick of battle, he developed a fearless reputation for hurling himself into danger, dodging bullets and explosions to rescue wounded men – sometimes getting so close to enemy lines he could hear the Japanese soldiers whispering to one another. This commitment to duty not only earned Doss the respect of his fellow soldiers but two Bronze Stars.

As their empire crumbled all around, the Japanese grew increasingly desperate. Indoctrinated by an extreme nationalist version of the samurai warrior code, young soldiers were raised to see death as preferable to dishonour. Their emperor was a living god, and the idea of allowing a foreign nation to conquer the

Of the 25,000 conscientious objectors to serve in non-combat roles in WWII, Desmond Doss was the only to receive a Medal of Honor

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“HE WAS ONE OF THE BRAVEST PERSONS ALIVE, AND THEN TO HAVE HIM END UP SAVING MY LIFE WAS THE IRONY OF THE WHOLE THING”

Captain Jack Glover

Japanese archipelago, one neither China nor the Mongols had ever conquered, was unthinkable.

After the brutal battle for Iwo Jima, the only Pacific battle where American casualties exceeded Japanese, the Allies planned to seize Okinawa – the largest of the Ryukyu islands stretching south from Japan towards Taiwan. This would serve as a foothold from which to launch a bigger campaign for the subjugation of Japan.

Launching the largest amphibious assault of the Pacific campaign, the Allies made their first Okinawan landing on 1 April. Surprised at the lack of resistance, they quickly took the Yontan and Kadena airfields. Before long, 60,000 American troops had poured into Okinawa, where 110,000 Japanese soldiers had set up defences deep into the southern half of the island.

The further the Allies pushed, beneath artillery fire, typhoons and heavy rain, the harder the resistance became. The mountainous Okinawan landscape was brutal, and the Japanese had established networks of defensive fortifications of tunnels, caves and pillboxes. It took the American 184th Infantry eight days, and 1,500 lives, to capture a crag known as The Pinnacle. While taking the island of Iejima, the 77th killed 4,700 Japanese soldiers. This included 1,500 civilians who had been armed and forced to fight by the Imperial forces – almost a third of its civilian populace.

The fiercest fighting took place along the Shuri-Yonburu Line, a string of defensive positions cutting Okinawa in half, centred on Shuri Castle. Built along a series of steep ridges and escarpments, these would require grit and resolve to overcome. After an enormous 27-battalion artillery barrage, with naval gunfire and aircraft hammering the Japanese rear, the Americans launched a co-ordinated attack. By the end of the month, while some units had gained almost 2km of ground, the 96th Infantry Division was bogged down on its western flank by the 4.1km-long Urasoe–Mura Escarpment, which was defended by the Japanese 32nd Infantry.

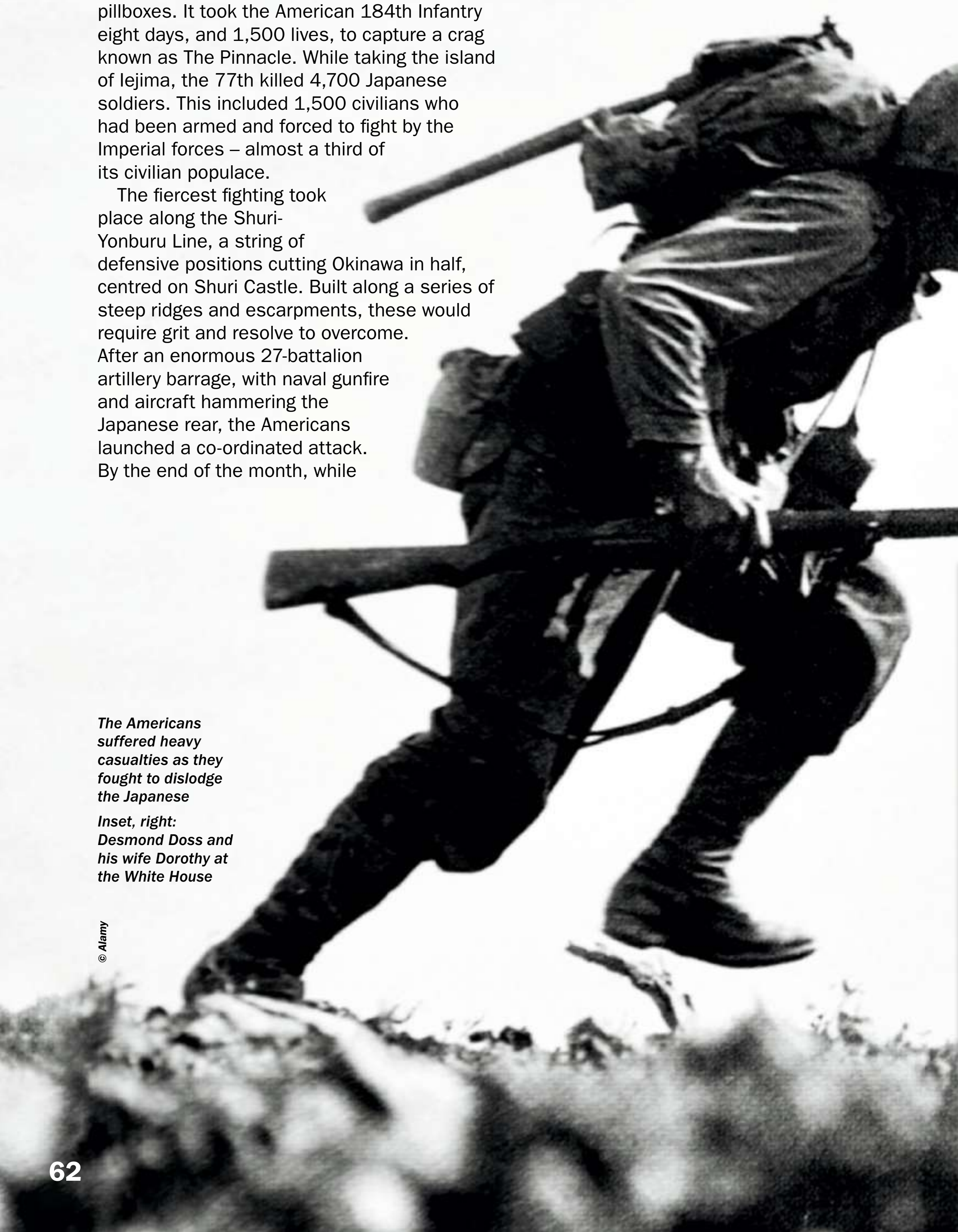
> “HIS NAME BECAME A SYMBOL THROUGHOUT THE 77TH INFANTRY DIVISION FOR OUTSTANDING GALLANTRY FAR ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY”
>
> **Medal of Honor citation**

With a cliff face towering 122 metres high, American soldiers began to refer to the escarpment as Hacksaw Ridge. Too narrow to set machine guns atop, the Japanese instead hunkered down in a series of caves, tunnels and pillboxes on the reverse side of the slope, waiting for the Americans to climb up – transforming the peak into a hellish battleground of attrition. On one occasion, the Americans formed a human ladder and tried to scale a giant monolith on the eastern end known as Needle Rock – only to be gunned down by machine gun fire. The Americans responded by driving Japanese soldiers from their caves with flamethrowers, shooting them as they fled.

In just four days, the 96th lost 536 men, pushing its numbers down to just 40% fighting efficiency. On 29 April, it was relieved by the 77th, just in time. In the ensuing days the 77th and the Japanese defenders engaged in endless attacks and counterattacks. The ridge became a living nightmare, where “all hell rolled into one”, a claustrophobic battlefield with a constant stream of grenade duels, night raids, satchel charging caves and hand-to-hand fights to the death. One American soldier even rushed into a Japanese machine gun position with a grenade in his hand, blowing himself up, alongside five enemies.

On another occasion, the machine gun fire was so intense, a soldier was decapitated. On 2 May, spotting a wounded man 180 metres ahead, Doss ran into rifle and mortar fire to retrieve him. Two days later, when four men were cut down attacking a heavily fortified cave, Doss ran through a shower of grenades to reach them. There, he treated them seven metres from the cave mouth, before hauling them back one-by-one, under fire.

Three days later, Japan’s 32nd Army launched its only large counter-offensive of the campaign. That Sabbath day the Japanese rained down artillery, mortar and machine gun fire upon the ridge, decimating the Americans



The Americans suffered heavy casualties as they fought to dislodge the Japanese

Inset, right: Desmond Doss and his wife Dorothy at the White House

© Alamy

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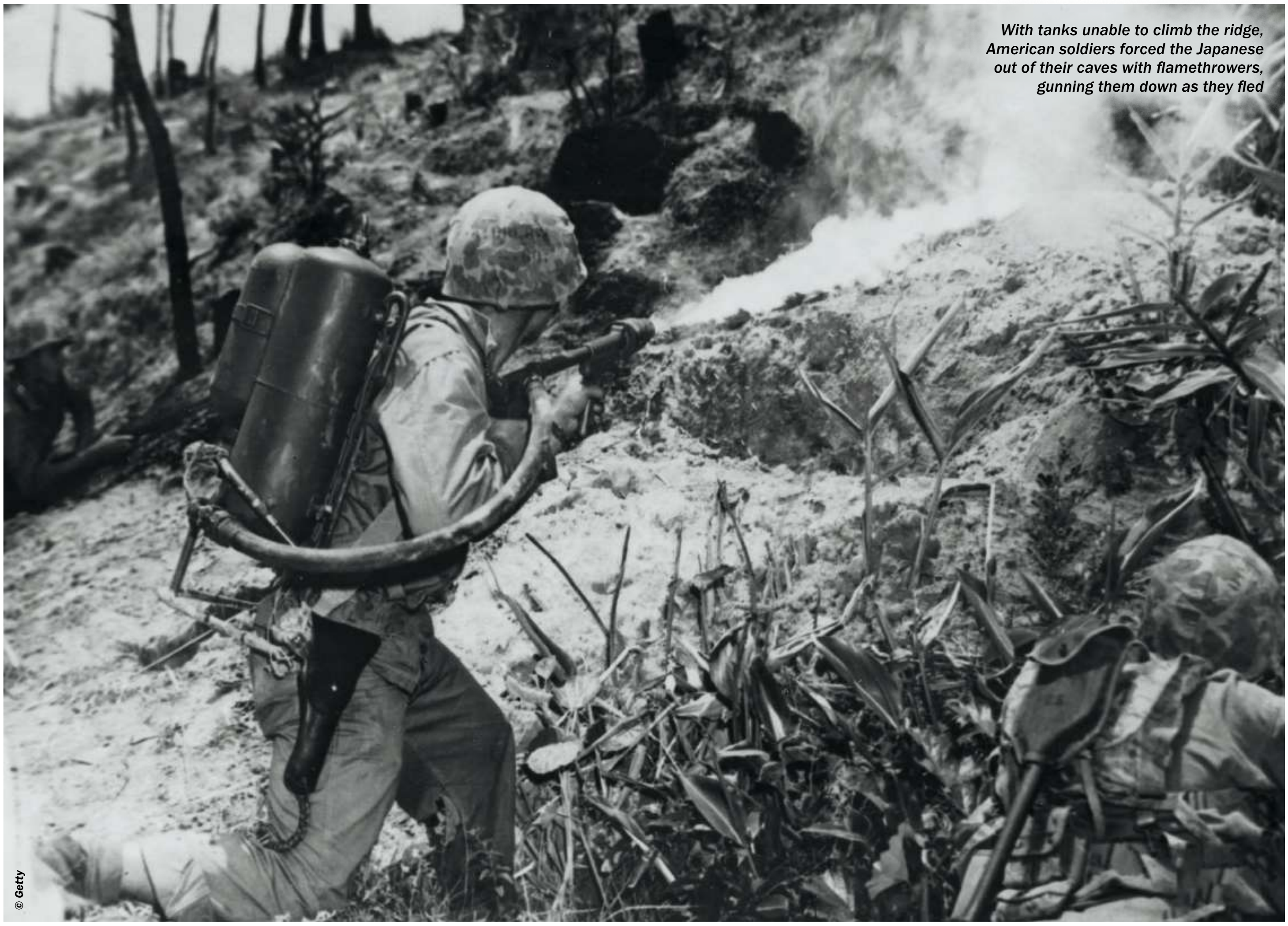

With tanks unable to climb the ridge, American soldiers forced the Japanese out of their caves with flamethrowers, gunning them down as they fled

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and forcing them back down the cliff. In the aftermath, 75 were left for dead; crawling and clutching their wounds. However, amid endless hail of bombs and bullets, Doss ignored the order to retreat.

Instead, he single-handedly tended to the wounded, carrying them 90 metres towards the cliff face, under constant enemy fire. Once there, he lowered them down using a makeshift litter on a rope, using double bowline knots and a tree stump for an anchor. Surrounded by grave danger, he lowered between 50 and 75 wounded men to a safe spot 11 metres below, before running back into the explosions and bullets to save more. Among them was Captain Glover, who had earlier tried to have Doss transferred.

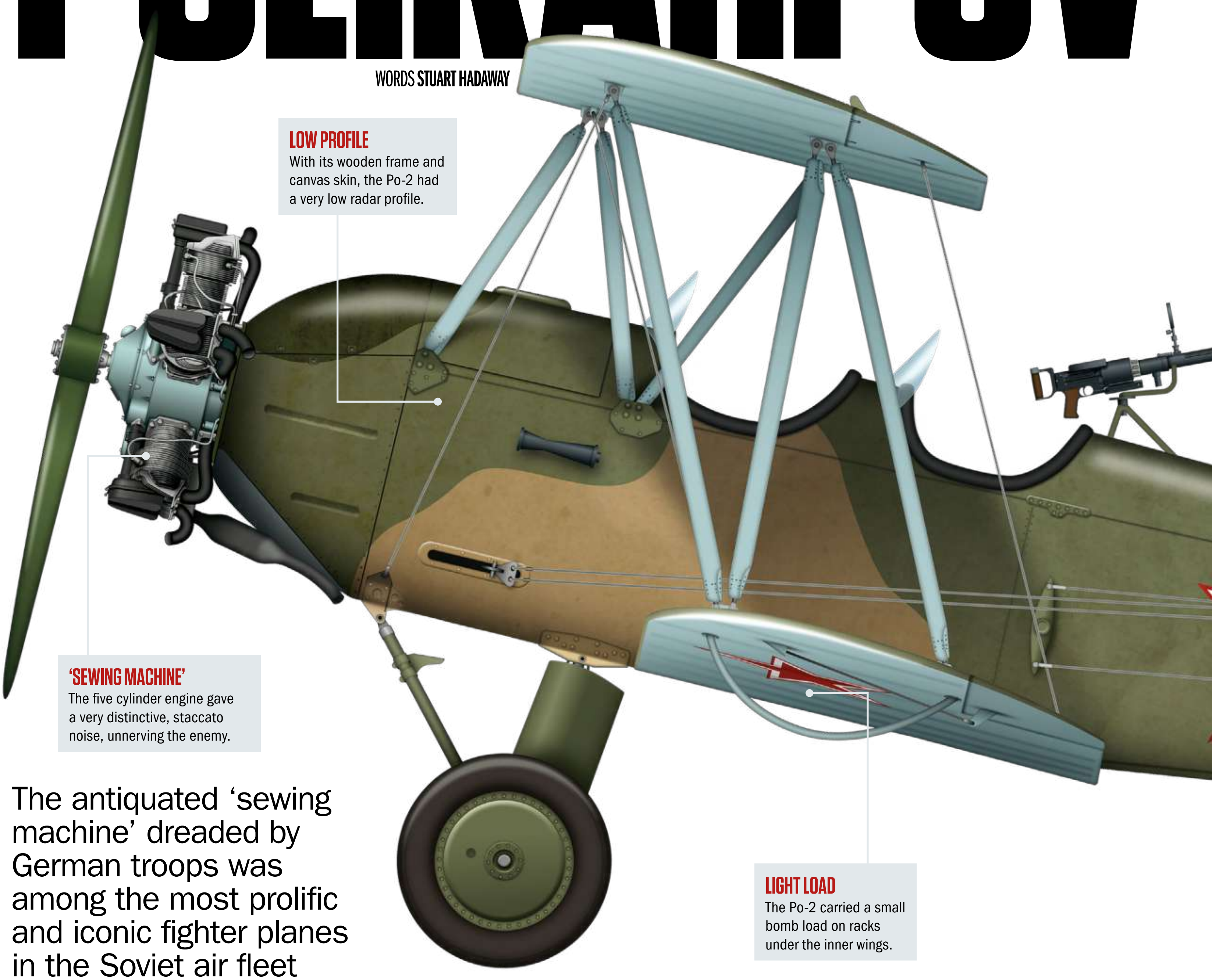
Japan's attempted counterattack ended in a series of disastrous defeats, and the next day the Americans finally overran Hacksaw Ridge, where more than 3,000 Japanese soldiers had fought to the death. Two weeks later, during another battle, as his men took cover Doss continued treating the wounded until a grenade blew up near him, riddling his legs with shrapnel. Rather than risk another medic's life, he tended to his own injuries and waited five hours to be carried off on a litter. Upon spotting a soldier in worse shape, he jumped off and told his men to help him instead. While waiting for its return, he was shot in the arm by a Japanese soldier, and thinking on his toes, crafted a splint from a rifle stock before crawling 275 metres to safety.

After the bloody and gruelling Battle of Okinawa, which the Japanese called the Rain of Steel, rather than stage a costly invasion of the rest of Japan the US dropped nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki – killing 105,000 mostly civilians instantly. Japan finally surrendered on 15 August, bringing the war to a close. Although Doss was one of 25,000 conscientious objectors to serve in non-combat roles, on October 12 1945 he was the only one to be awarded a Medal of Honor by President Harry S Truman. Reflecting on the award, he said, "I feel that I received the Congressional Medal of Honor because I kept the Golden Rule that we read in Matthew 7:12: 'All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'"

Doss spent five years in hospital recovering from his injuries and later lost a lung to tuberculosis, leaving him unable to work. Instead, he devoted himself to working with young people on church-sponsored programmes, before passing away at the age of 87 in 2006.

POLIKARPOV

WORDS **STUART HADAWAY**



LOW PROFILE
With its wooden frame and canvas skin, the Po-2 had a very low radar profile.

'SEWING MACHINE'
The five cylinder engine gave a very distinctive, staccato noise, unnerving the enemy.

LIGHT LOAD
The Po-2 carried a small bomb load on racks under the inner wings.

The antiquated 'sewing machine' dreaded by German troops was among the most prolific and iconic fighter planes in the Soviet air fleet

Designed in the 1920s as a general purpose trainer, crop duster and light transport aircraft, the Polikarpov U-2 (later reclassified the Po-2) saw distinguished service during World War II. It was old, basic and slow, but it found a niche as a reconnaissance and communications aircraft, while some models were fitted out as air ambulances. With short take-off and landing capabilities and able to operate from rough fields, its slow speed also made it hard for the enemy to target, with its top speed roughly the same as the stalling speed of Germany's most modern fighters.

It was as a night bomber that the Polikarpov Po-2 achieved immortal fame, especially in the hands of the pilots of the all-female 588th Night Bomber Regiment. With female aircrew and ground crew, these 'Night Witches' flew sorties against German rear areas from the Battle of Stalingrad all the way through to the Battle of Berlin, earning an impressive array of awards and the fear and respect of the enemy. Often gliding in to attack, their raids added sleepless nights and further stress to the already hard-pressed German troops, with a vastly disproportional psychological effect in relation to the physical damage caused.

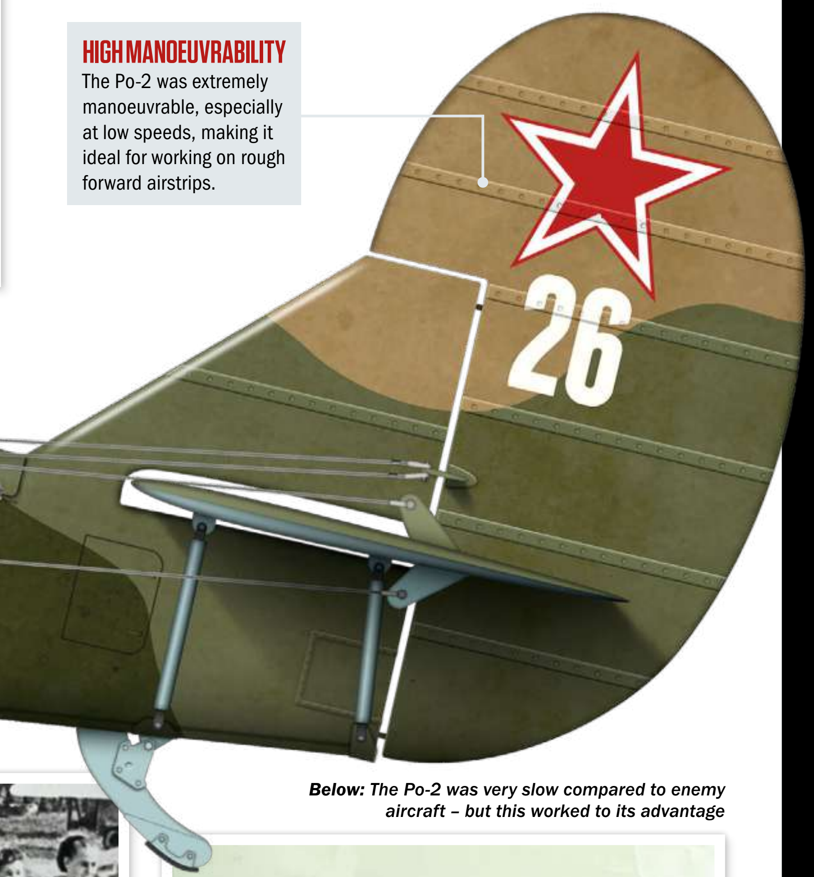
PO-2

POLIKARPOV PO-2

COMMISSIONED:	1926
ORIGIN:	SOVIET UNION
LENGTH:	8.17 METRES (26FT 10IN)
WINGSPAN:	11.42 METRES (35FT 5IN)
ENGINE:	SHVETSOV M-11D 92 KW (125 HP) RADIAL
CREW:	1–2
ENDURANCE:	3.5 HOURS
PRIMARY WEAPON:	1 X 7.62MM (0.30IN) MACHINE GUN & UP TO 350KG BOMBS

Illustration: Battlefield Design

> “THE ‘NIGHT WITCHES’ FLEW SORTIES AGAINST GERMAN REAR AREAS FROM THE BATTLE OF STALINGRAD ALL THE WAY THROUGH TO THE BATTLE OF BERLIN”



HIGH MANOEUVRABILITY
The Po-2 was extremely manoeuvrable, especially at low speeds, making it ideal for working on rough forward airstrips.

***Below:** The all-female crews of 588th Night Bomber Regiment earned a fearsome reputation during WWII*

***Below:** The Po-2 was very slow compared to enemy aircraft – but this worked to its advantage*

Images © Alamy

ARMAMENT

Although experiments were made with a forward-firing gun, most military Po-2s had only a single 7.62mm (0.30in) ShKAS or DA machine gun in the rear cockpit. Many night bombers flew without defensive weapons, relying on darkness for protection. A bomb load of up to 350kg, made up of 50kg (110lb) and 100kg (220lb) bombs, could be carried on racks under the lower wings. Arguably the Polikarpov Po-2's real weapon was the sleep deprivation and frayed nerves its night raids caused.

When a machine gun was carried, it was on a fixed rearward facing mount

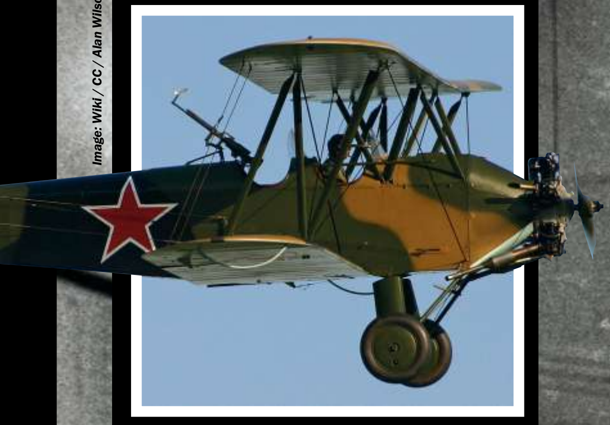


Image: Wiki/ CC/ Alan Wilson

The Night Witches also had all-female ground crew. Here an armourer loads a magazine for a ShKAS

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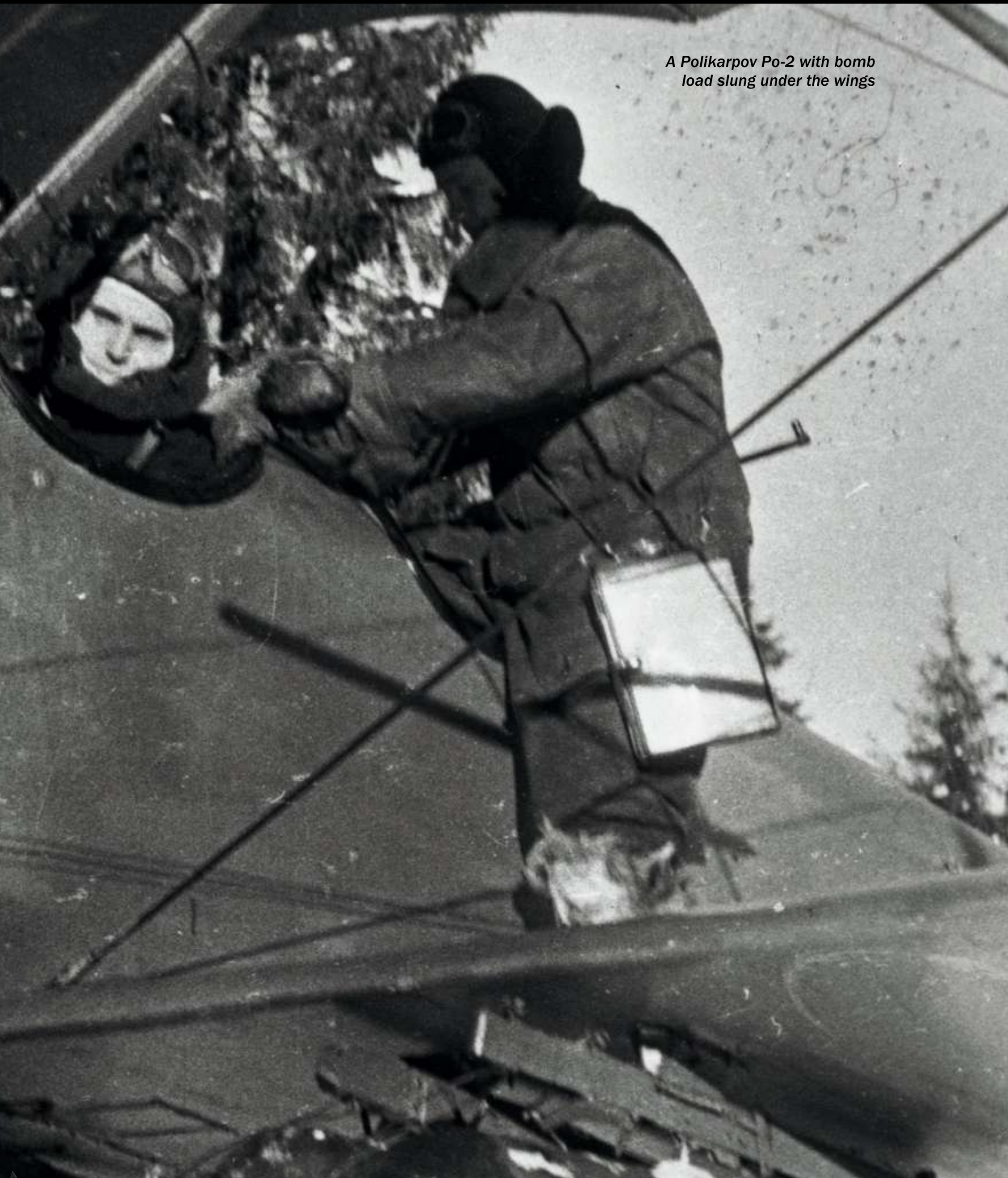
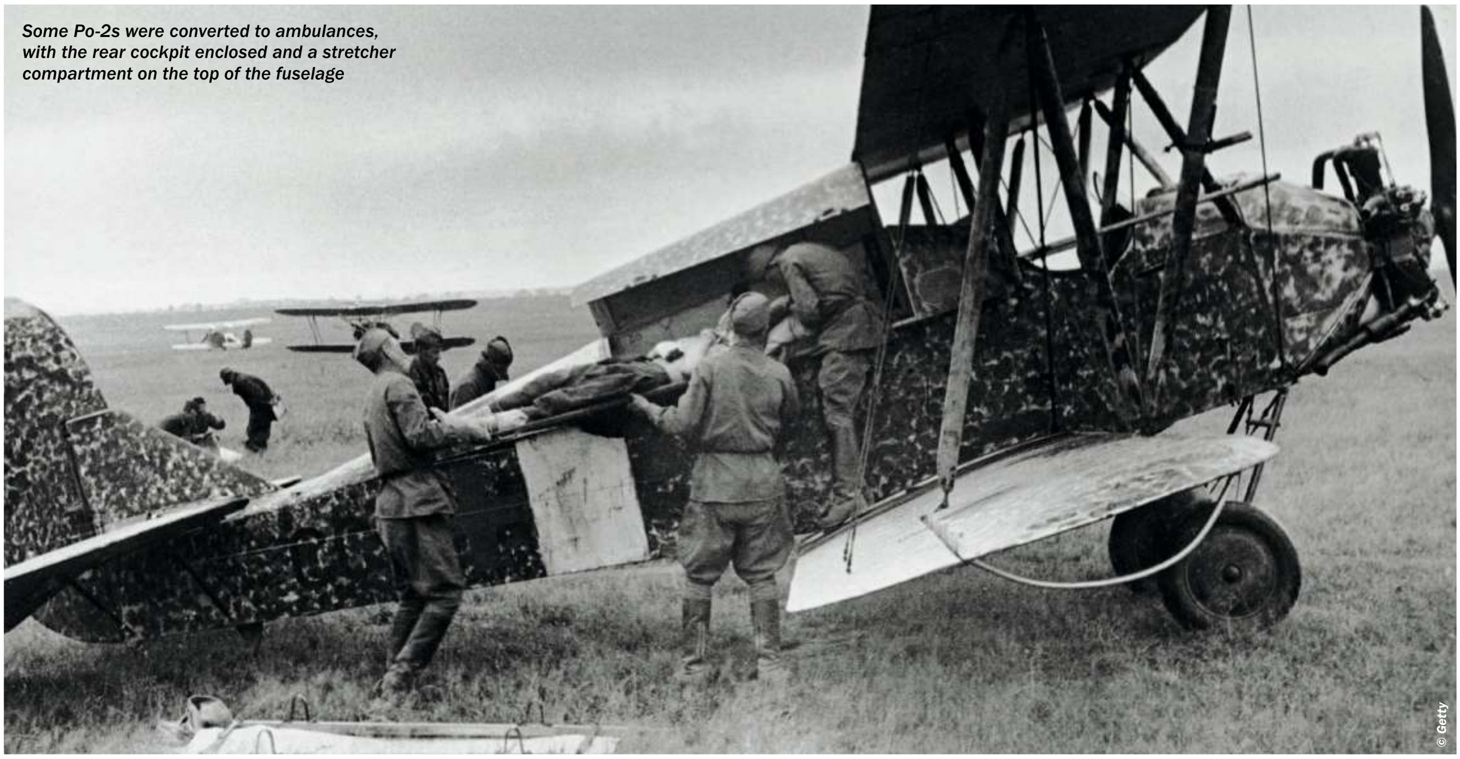


A Polikarpov Po-2 with bomb load slung under the wings

© Getty

> "THE POLIKARPOV PO-2'S REAL WEAPON WAS THE SLEEP DEPRIVATION AND FRAYED NERVES ITS NIGHT RAIDS CAUSED"



Some Po-2s were converted to ambulances, with the rear cockpit enclosed and a stretcher compartment on the top of the fuselage

© Getty

DESIGN

The Po-2 was a simple machine, designed to be easy to build, maintain and fly. Many were built in repair depots and very basic factories. A plywood-covered front fuselage gave way to a wire-braced and fabric-covered rear fuselage. The staggered, two-spar, single-bay wings were wooden framed with fabric covering. The inter-plane struts and undercarriage were made of steel tube for additional strength, and the undercarriage also had basic suspension. It was ideal for operating from rough airstrips with only the most rudimentary of facilities.

The distinctive high tail of the Po-2 allowed for incredible manoeuvrability at low speeds

© Alamy

ENGINE

The Shvetsov M-11D was a five cylinder air-cooled radial engine. Early models had a short service life, although this steadily improved, and it could be easily maintained in basic field conditions. The five cylinders gave the engine a rough and highly distinctive sound. This was memorialised in the nicknames bestowed by its enemies – the 'Sewing Machine' by the Germans, the 'Nerve Saw' by the Finns – for both of whom the distinctive sound coming out of the darkness was something to be dreaded.

The Shvetsov M-11D's five cylinders gave it a distinctive shape as well as a distinctive sound

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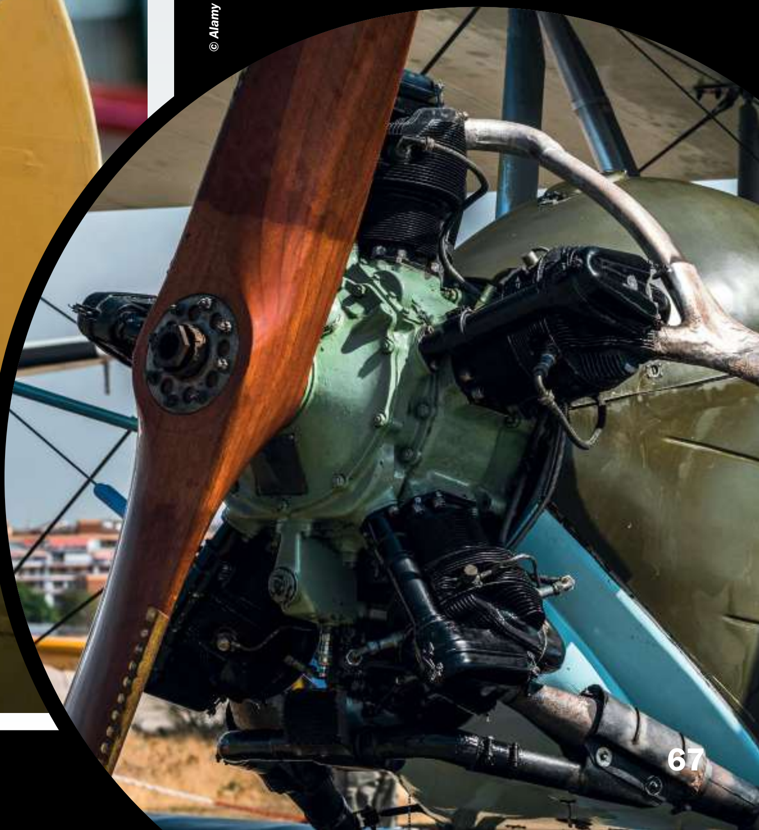

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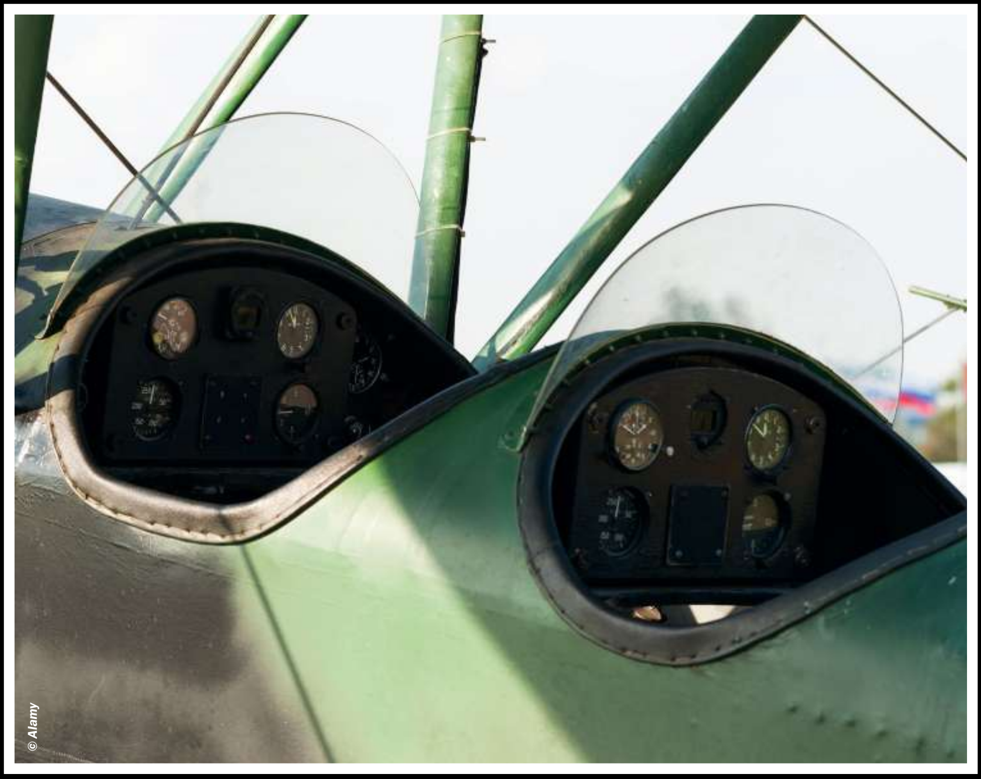
COCKPIT

The Polikarpov Po-2 had tandem cockpits. Although the instrumentation was quite basic, its training role meant that the instruments and controls were duplicated in both cockpits. This configuration was kept in the bomber version, where the rear seat was occupied by a specialist navigator to assist in the arduous task of finding precise targets at night. The rear cockpit was sometimes also fitted with a machine gun, but the pilot retained control of the bomb-release mechanism.

Above: *Night Witches being briefed, showing how open and exposed the cockpits were*

Below: *The tandem cockpits of the Po-2*



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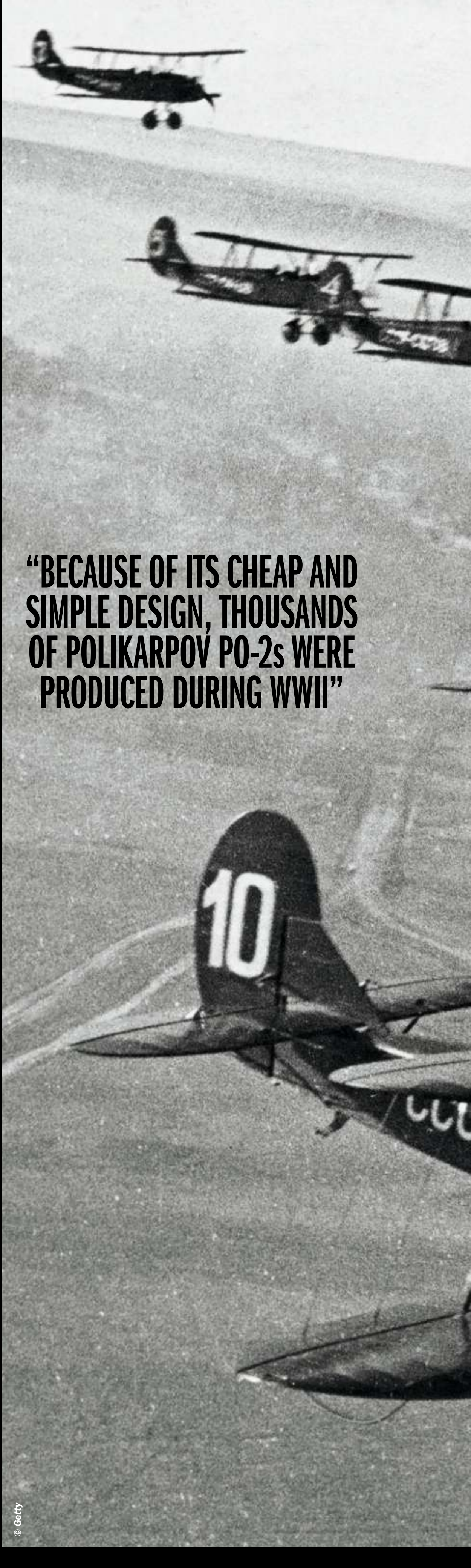

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"BECAUSE OF ITS CHEAP AND SIMPLE DESIGN, THOUSANDS OF POLIKARPOV PO-2s WERE PRODUCED DURING WWII"

CCCP-C2182
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P-C5426
CCCP

The versatile aircraft was even used in Korean War in the early 1950s

SERVICE HISTORY

Entering service with the Soviet air force in 1930, the Polikarpov Po-2 was at first used for a wide range of purposes, including as an ambulance aircraft, aerial surveyor and reconnaissance aircraft. Because of its cheap and simple design, thousands of Polikarpov Po-2s were produced during WWII and the aircraft was employed across the Eastern Front. The most well-known deployment of the Po-2 was with the famed female pilots of the 588th Night Bomber Regiment. Formed by Soviet aviator Marina Raskova, in addition to their nighttime bombing runs the regiment also conducted reconnaissance sorties as well as propaganda drops over German-held territory. The regiment gained the nickname 'Nachthexen' (Night Witches) because of the sound the wooden airframe made as the bombers glided in to attack. The Po-2 continued in Soviet service after the end of WWII, and many were loaned to North Korea during the Korean War. This incredibly saw the wooden biplane enter into a jet-age warzone, where it continued to perform well in stealthy nighttime bombing runs. Discontinued by the middle of the 1950s, around 40,000 Po-2s were built during more than 20 years in service.

***Below:** Nadezhda Popova, commander of the famous Night Witches who terrorised the enemy in their Po-2s*

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SPECIAL

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WWII THIS MONTH...

MARCH 1941

To commemorate 80 years since the Second World War, **History of War** will be taking a look at some of the key events taking place during each month of the conflict

A ROYAL COUP

After pressure from Hitler, the Yugoslavian government signed the Tripartite Pact on 25 March. Two days later, a military coup, supported by the British SOE, declared that the 17-year-old Prince Peter Karadordevic had gained his majority and placed him on the throne of Yugoslavia. Prince Paul, the royal regent, was forced from power, along with the government sympathetic to the Axis. However, the new regime would not last long, and Nazi Germany began bombing Belgrade on 6 April in retaliation, forcing the young king to flee to London along with his exiled government. Yugoslavia was conquered by the Nazis in a matter of days, and the Wehrmacht continued its offensive against Greece. King Peter II spent the remainder of the war in exile and never returned to his country, which fell under Soviet control after the war.

LEND-LEASE APPROVED

Though President Roosevelt had recently won re-election on a promise of non-intervention in what was perceived as Europe's war, the Lend-Lease Act was passed by the US Congress on 11 March. This was a critical moment in the build up to the US participation in the war, and allowed ammunition, tanks and supplies worth around $7 billion to be sent to Europe. Speaking in support of the Act, Secretary of War Henry L Stimson told the Senate: "We are buying… not lending. We are buying our own security while we prepare."

THE EMPEROR RETURNS

Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia, inspects troops during the Allied campaign to defeat the Italian occupation of his country. By spring 1941, British, Commonwealth and Ethiopian forces were closing in on the Italians, who after their defeat at the strategically vital fort at Keren on 27 March quickly began withdrawing from the region. During the Italian occupation, Ethiopian Arbegnoch (or patriot) guerrilla fighters continued to resist the invaders, and later joined with the Allied forces helping to liberate the country.

All images © Getty

MUSEUMS & EVENTS

Discover the Welsh museum that celebrates British military medicine, a railway station with WWII history and a Northern Irish castle's connection with St Patrick

Cardiff's Medical Museum

The Museum of Military Medicine is moving from Surrey to a new home in the Welsh capital

The Museum of Military Medicine tells the story of military healthcare disciplines including medicine, nursing, dental, veterinary and allied health professions, from the British Civil Wars to the present day. It explores developments in military medicine, including many that have gone on to be used in hospitals around the world to save lives and provide treatments that improve quality of life and wellbeing. Those stories are told through exhibitions, archives and collections that incorporate over 30,000 objects that preserve the heritage of those who have saved lives through service.

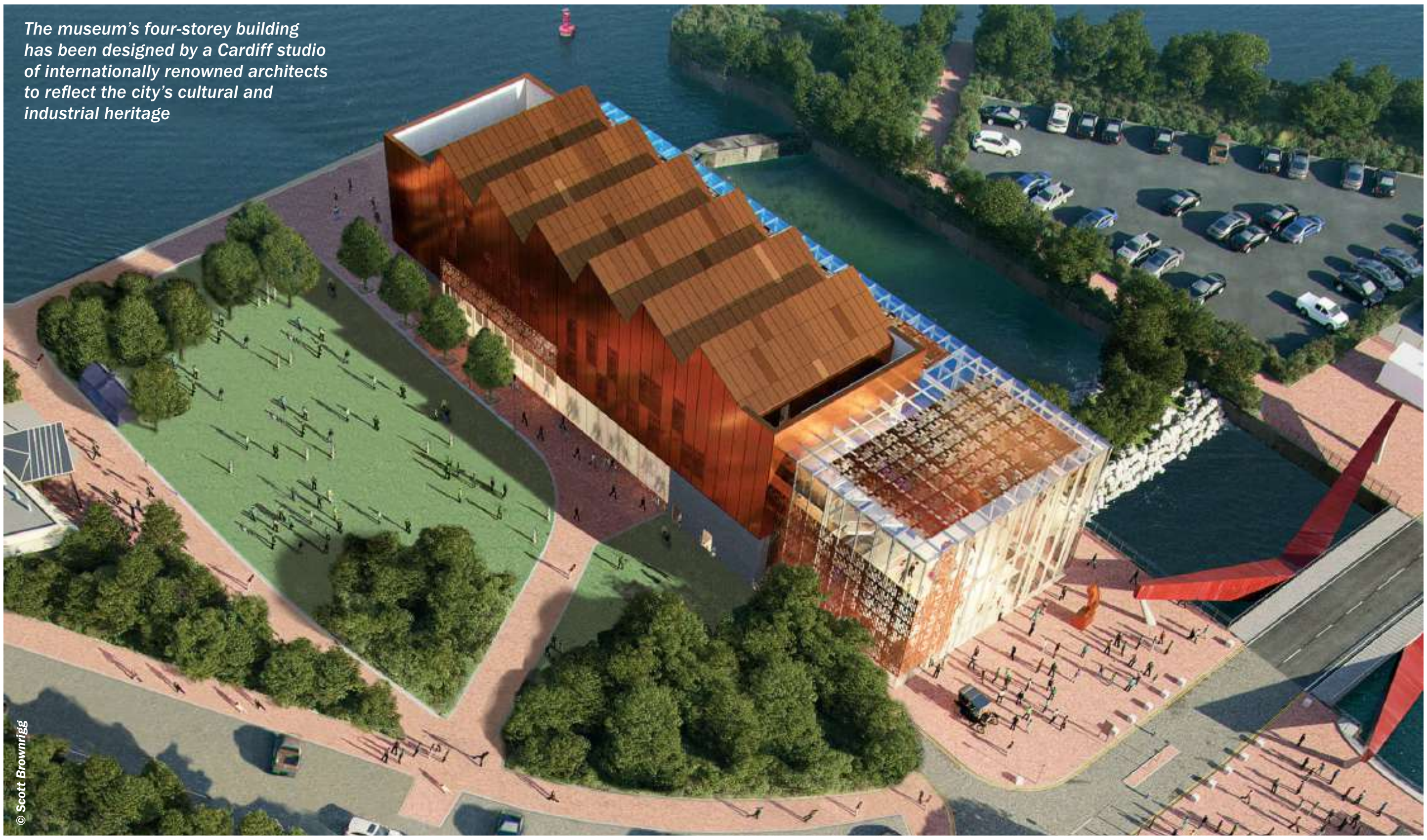
The museum is currently based in Surrey but has been searching for a new location that saw several UK cities being considered. Cardiff has been chosen as its new home because of its medical heritage and innovations. The Welsh capital's historical connections to military medicine include the Royal Hamadryad Hospital and before that, HMS Hamadryad – a hospital ship that first arrived in Cardiff's docks in 1866.

The museum will construct its brand new building on land at Britannia Quay. As part of the approval, the museum has committed to working with local communities to create a venue that will serve and benefit local residents and attract tourism from across Great Britain. It's also aiming to bring 'Deep Space', an 8K immersive interactive video attraction to Britain for the first time. The large-scale projection technology can be used in medical lectures to allow doctors and students to explore the details of the human body by projecting complex images of bones and organs.

Stories about military medicine will be gathered from around Wales, such as the 130th St John Field Ambulance – a unit that saw teams from South Wales coal fields save lives on the Western Front during World War I. There are also plans to develop a veterans' out-patient clinic within the museum in partnership with Cardiff and Vale University Health Board and alongside Veterans' NHS Wales. This would be a space for veterans suffering with service-related mental health diagnoses to receive evidenced-based treatment and rehabilitation.

Jason Semmens, Director of the Museum of Military Medicine, says, "This decision is a major milestone in our vision to create a world-class visitor attraction that will showcase and inspire further medical advancements and bring new resources and technologies to Wales. The museum will become a centre for new educational programmes, foster research partnerships and create in Cardiff Bay an institution that demonstrates Wales's place at the forefront of UK innovation in healthcare."

For more information visit: www.museumofmilitarymedicine.org.uk



The museum's four-storey building has been designed by a Cardiff studio of internationally renowned architects to reflect the city's cultural and industrial heritage

© Scott Brownrigg

Retford's Rail Secrets

A Nottinghamshire town's railway station with a wartime history has been designated as a Grade II listed building for its remarkably preserved interior

A total of 423 historic places have been added to the National Heritage List for England as listed buildings. These range from a Kentish shipwreck, 17th century wall paintings in Hertfordshire and a Victorian train station that played a vital role during WWII.

Built during 1891-92, Retford Railway Station was run by the Great Northern Railway (GNR). Conceived by the GNR's appointed architect Henry Goddard, the building was designed in an Italianate villa style that was favoured by the railway company and boasts impressive decorative ironwork on the platform canopy.

During World War II, the GNR played a major part in transporting troops across the UK, and Retford Railway Station was repurposed as a canteen and rest room by the Women's Voluntary Service. It served British and other Allied forces over two million meals between 1940-46.

Part of the reason that the station has been listed as Grade II is because the dining and refreshment rooms showcase original tiled finishes that were particularly ornate for their purpose. Having been covered with plasterboard for many years, the decorative scheme has miraculously survived the numerous renovations the station has undergone. They were recently discovered by Bassetlaw Railway Society, who are now planning to restore the rooms to their former glory for visitors to enjoy.

For more information visit: www.historicengland.org.uk

The Station Master's House contains preserved interiors that the Women's Voluntary Service and Allied soldiers during WWII would have easily recognised

Images © Historic England

County Antrim's Tintagel

The windswept ruin of Dunseverick Castle has a history stretching all the way back to Ireland's patron saint

Located near the famous Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, Dunseverick Castle is situated among rugged coastal landscapes. The site has been fortified since the 5th century, and legend has it that Saint Patrick visited the nearby village where he baptised a future bishop of Ireland called Olcán. Later a part of the Gaelic kingdom of Dalriada, Dunseverick became the seat of one of its legendary kings, Fergus Mór.

Vikings attacked the area in 870 and destroyed the original fort, but Dunseverick's history was not just confined to the Dark Ages. The castle was the home of the O'Cahan family for centuries and it was captured and largely demolished by Scottish Covenanter forces commanded by Colonel Robert Munro during the British Civil Wars. Such was the destruction during the 17th century that only ruins of the gate lodge still exist. Another small tower did survive but it eventually collapsed into the sea in 1978. What remains of the architecture dates from approximately the 16th century, and is similar to other Ulster fortresses, including nearby Dunluce Castle.

Dunseverick is located off the B147 on 'Causeway Road' where there is a sign-posted small car park. It's free to explore and intrepid visitors can even walk from the castle to the Giant's Causeway itself.

Dunseverick Castle was the northern terminus of an ancient Irish royal highway called Slige Midluachra ('High Kings Road')

For more information visit: www.discovernorthernireland.com

© Getty

REVIEWS

Our pick of the latest military history books and films

THE FINAL STAND

RUSSIAN CADETS FACE CERTAIN DEATH AS THEY TRY TO HALT THE NAZI WAR MACHINE'S ADVANCE ON MOSCOW

Director: Vadim Shmelyov **Cast:** Artyom Gubin, Lubov Konstantinova, Igor Yudin **Released:** 8 March 2021 (DVD)

It's October 1941 and the relentless Wehrmacht is closing in on Moscow, every attempt to halt the German tide ruthlessly crushed beneath the boots and tracks of an army hell-bent on seizing the Russian capital. Desperate to buy the city time to prepare for the coming onslaught, Red Army commanders reluctantly order 3,500 cadets from the Podolsk Military School to march to the Ilyinsky Frontier. The fate of the Motherland will depend on their ability to hold out against a vastly superior (numerically and materially) enemy. Or so Vadim Shmelyov's new war epic claims.

Starring Artyom Gubin as Sashka Lavrov, a courageous if occasionally irritating cadet, and Lubov Konstantinova as Sashka's reproachful yet caring sweetheart, *The Final Stand* wastes little time, plunging the viewer into the savagery of the Eastern Front. Suddenly cutting from a scene of tenderness or comradely teasing to a cratered battlefield littered with corpses cleverly enhances this film's shock factor, and Shmelyov's refusal to shield the main protagonists is laudable. As the unremitting barbarity on display proves, nobody was safe.

The battle scenes are stunningly shot and yet the fighting remains gritty and cruel, a fitting sense of hopelessness weighing heavier with every line of defence overwhelmed, every promise of reinforcement failing to materialise. The gravity of the situation is often revealed not in the panicked eyes of a recruit facing a German tank but in the lines etched on the faces of the commanders tasked with sending them to their fates.

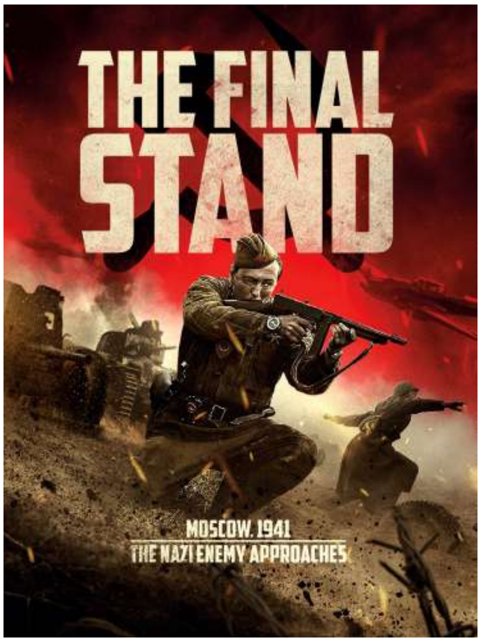
It is, therefore, unfortunate that the impression of a seemingly unstoppable enemy is too often punctured by what can only be

"THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION IS OFTEN REVEALED NOT IN THE PANICKED EYES OF A RECRUIT FACING A GERMAN TANK BUT IN THE LINES ETCHED ON THE FACES OF THE COMMANDERS TASKED WITH SENDING THEM TO THEIR FATES"

described as moments of incompetence on behalf of the Germans. While no army ever fought an entirely seamless campaign, lurching from Moscow's soon-to-be conquerors to struggling to deal with a poorly disguised artillery unit brimming with terrified teenagers casts the villains of this piece in an odd light.

Another fault line that runs through this homage to the forces of the Soviet Union are several understandable yet ultimately doomed attempts to inject some poignancy into the story. Mothers and wives bidding their loved ones farewell as they head to the front and snatched moments between two forbidden lovers are of course a tragic part of any conflict, but against the unrelenting inhumanity that consumes much of this film they never stand a chance of making their intended impression. Some occasionally plodding dialogue does little to help elevate them above the bombs and bullets that always follow.

Even so, Shmelyov's latest contribution to the annals of WWII epics is a taught, haunting and at times moving offering, one that ably serves its primary purpose of reminding the world just how much the USSR had to sacrifice in order to ensure its survival. While it seems a stretch to suggest that the Podolsk cadets were all that stood between Hitler and Moscow, their courage and commitment to the cause is beyond all doubt, a willingness to fight to the end that pushed beyond what any human should be capable of. A raw, realistic and yet inspiring remembrance of their bravery is the least they deserve, and in *The Final Stand* they have received it. **CG**



THE DIG

A BEAUTIFULLY SHOT IF SOMETIMES MEANDERING RETELLING OF THE SUTTON HOO DISCOVERY

Certificate: 12 **Director:** Simon Stone **Cast:** Carey Mulligan, Ralph Fiennes, Lily James

Based on the book of the same name, *The Dig* is a retelling of the events around the discover of the Sutton Hoo archaeological site, one of the most extraordinary finds in Europe. With excavation beginning in 1939, what started as a buried ship revealed itself to be a richly adorned burial chamber with some of the most incredible Anglo-Saxon treasures found to this day.

Widowed estate owner Edith Pretty (Mulligan) hires the much sought-after and self-taught archaeologist (or 'digger' as he prefers to be called) Basil Brown (Feinnes) to excavate some burial mounds on her land in Suffolk. What Brown finds sends ripples through the archaeological community, starting a mild-mannered war between the academics who want control of the site and its treasures and Pretty who wants oversight and Brown to remain in charge.

While there's a great deal more happening in this story, as we'll explore, this is the main thrust of the film and some of its most interesting work. The class dynamics of the upper class Pretty and her working class employee Brown make for interesting contrast, accentuated by the arrival of much more snobbish academics on the site. The inter-class solidarity between the rich but condescended widow and the poor, humble, but brilliant digger forms the backbone of the experience and the film is often weaker when it leaves them to explore others.

As the date of this site's discovery should allude, war is on the horizon and the entire story exists under the cloud of impending conflict. Death and legacy are two intertwining concepts throughout: as the nation inches towards battle the film contemplates the legacy of a past civilisation being unearthed and the fragility of the current civilisation. The idea that we must seize life, love and friendship while we can certainly carries a lot of weight.

The story that attempts to drive this message home revolves around Peggy Piggott (James), who went on to become an acclaimed archaeologist best known today by her later married name Margaret Guido. With her new marriage seemingly already fraying she's drawn to Pretty's nephew Rory Lomax (Johnny Flynn), who's about to join the RAF. While Peggy is the third main character of the original book, this subplot feels like the weakest element of the overall story despite fine performances by those involved.

In terms of craft and performance, *The Dig* can't really be knocked. All of the leads bring a subtle depth to their respective characters, drawing us into their struggles and concerns. The pace of the film overall is considered and there's a refreshing tactility and grounded feel to the period setting. While every scene is packed full of detail, it doesn't feel too caught up in such things, preferring instead to linger on the land and scenery around Sutton Hoo. What you're left with is a small taste of what it must have been like to both live on the edge of impending doom and be involved in a history-redefining discovery. **JG**

Images: Netflix

VICTOIRE A WARTIME STORY OF RESISTANCE, COLLABORATION AND BETRAYAL

AN ASTONISHING STORY OF WARTIME SECRETS, TREASON AND SURVIVAL.

Author: Roland Philipps **Publisher:** The Bodley Head **Price:** £20.00

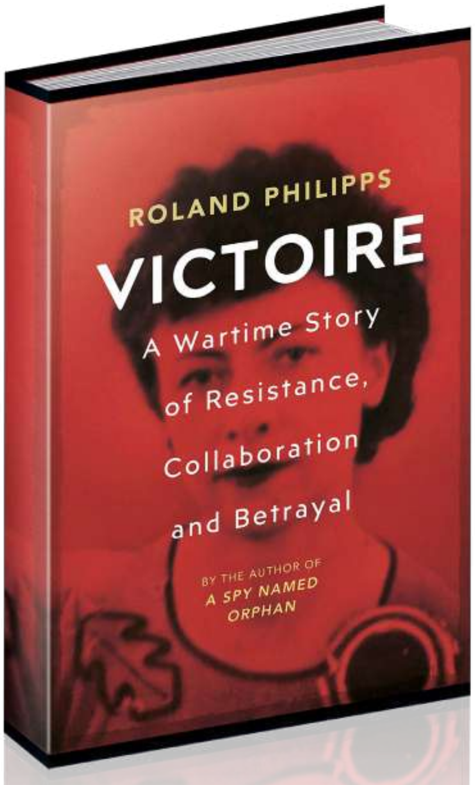
Sometimes a story comes along that really is stranger than fiction, one that would test the patience of any reader sitting down to enjoy a spy novel or cinemagoer hoping to lose themselves in some make-believe espionage. *Victoire: A Wartime Story of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal* is one of those stories and yet, despite its twists and turns, this tale of plot and counter-plot, of double agents and dodging the death penalty, is true. And it's all the more remarkable for it.

In 1940 Mathilde Carré, codenamed the Cat, worked with an associate to create a sprawling network of Allied intelligence agents in occupied France – the first of its kind. Despite the enormous risks the network's agents faced, they alone were able to provide on-the-ground information to London. Yet it was an endeavour fraught with unimaginable danger, and even the slightest suspicion of involvement carried with it the risk of torture and death at the hands of German occupying forces. When those forces discovered Carré's role in the network, she agreed to serve as a double agent known as Agent Victoire. When her duplicity was discovered by the SOE she turned double agent once more, giving up her Nazi paymasters. Carré's last change of allegiances saw her spirited away to London, where she languished in a prison cell before she was deported back to France at the end of the war, to face the death penalty. Once again though, the Cat proved that she was too cunning to be so easily silenced.

If all of this sounds like the plot of a novel, it barely scratches the surface of Mathilde Carré's remarkable life. She was an enigma to those who knew her and who were never sure if she could be trusted. The seeming ease with which she flip-flopped back and forth between allegiances made her a woman who had to be handled with kid gloves. By turns immensely useful to both the Axis and Allies, she could be equally as damaging to both.

Yet for all this, in Roland Philipps' sensitive and authoritative biography, Carré makes for a surprisingly sympathetic if rather mercurial character. What emerges from her story is the fact that, above everything else, she was determined to survive and Philipps handles her remarkable story with sensitivity, but not without unvarnished honesty. Drawing on a wide range of previously unexplored first-hand material, he paints an evocative picture of a world in turmoil, in which everyone was viewed with suspicion and no association, no matter how close, could be taken for granted.

Victoire: A Wartime Story of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal is a remarkable book, and Philipps handles its complexities with a masterful aplomb. In a twisted web of espionage and plot and counter-plot, he is the perfect guide. This book will linger with readers long after they have finished it and will no doubt give them cause to think not only about the actions of Agent Victoire, but also how they might have fared had they faced the same impossible choices. **CC**


ROLAND PHILIPPS
VICTOIRE
A Wartime Story of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal
BY THE AUTHOR OF A SPY NAMED ORPHAN

WHITE AS THE SHROUD

AFTER NEARLY THREE-QUARTERS OF A CENTURY OF FIGHTING, THE KASHMIR CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIA AND PAKISTAN SHOWS NO SIGN OF ABATING. IN FACT, THE FRONTIER LINES ARE BECOMING MORE DANGEROUS AND VOLATILE

Author: Myra MacDonald **Publisher:** Hurst **Price:** £25.00

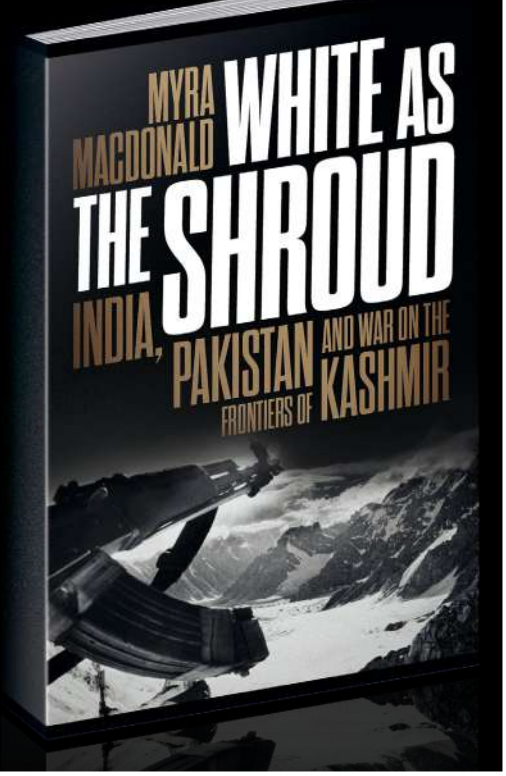
For nearly four decades, Pakistan and India have been embroiled in a bloody struggle for dominion of the Siachen glacier high in the Karakoram mountain range. This forbidding tract of ice demarks a border flashpoint between the two belligerents and China, Pakistan's ally. To date, the savage terrain and weather have claimed more lives than those lost in combat.

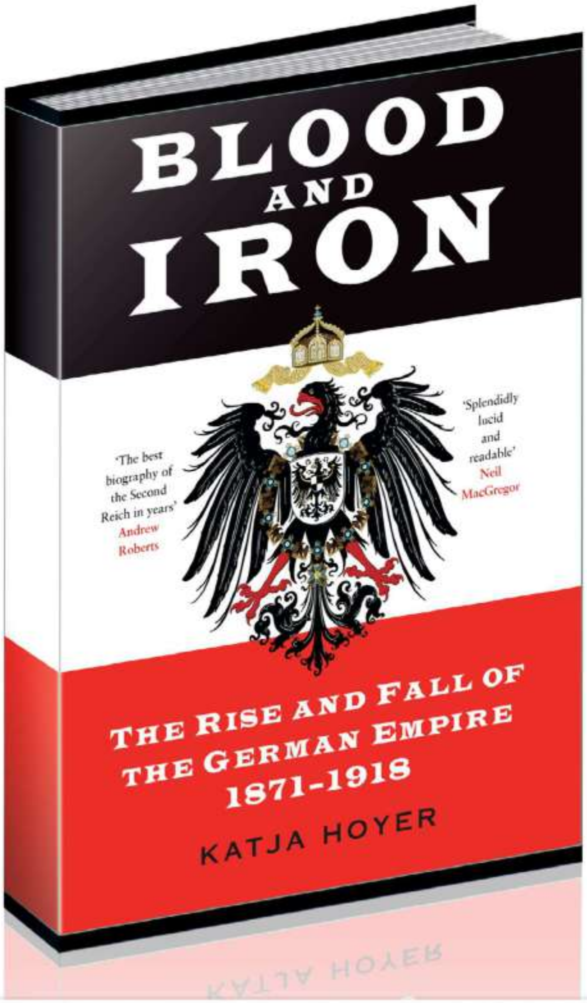
Myra MacDonald first came across the Siachen War on a visit to India's Ladakh, known as 'little Tibet', in the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. This has been the scene of conflict since the birth of the Islamic State of Pakistan in 1947, when it split from the newly independent India.

The author enlivens the narrative with personal accounts of those involved in the war, such as the desperate manoeuvring by Indian soldiers, at times on all fours, at 18,000 feet to retrieve the bodies of comrades killed in a reconnaissance mission to a Pakistani outpost.

From the trigger for full-scale war between India and Pakistan, to on-again off-again stalemate, to Pakistan's crushing defeat in the 1990 Kargil offensive that left 1,000 dead on both sides, to the 2003 ceasefire agreement and successive violation of the Line of Control – the dilemma of settling the Kashmir dispute remains intractable.

"One of the more confounding problems in the vicious circle between Pakistan, China and India is the extent to which all three countries cast themselves as victims," says the author. In this sense, nationalist pride remains the stumbling block to a definitive peace in this war on the roof of the world. **JS**




BLOOD AND IRON
'The best biography of the Second Reich in years' Andrew Roberts
'Splendidly lucid and readable' Neil MacGregor
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE 1871-1918
KATJA HOYER

BLOOD AND IRON

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE, 1871-1918

A LUCID REAPPRAISAL OF GERMANY'S SECOND REICH

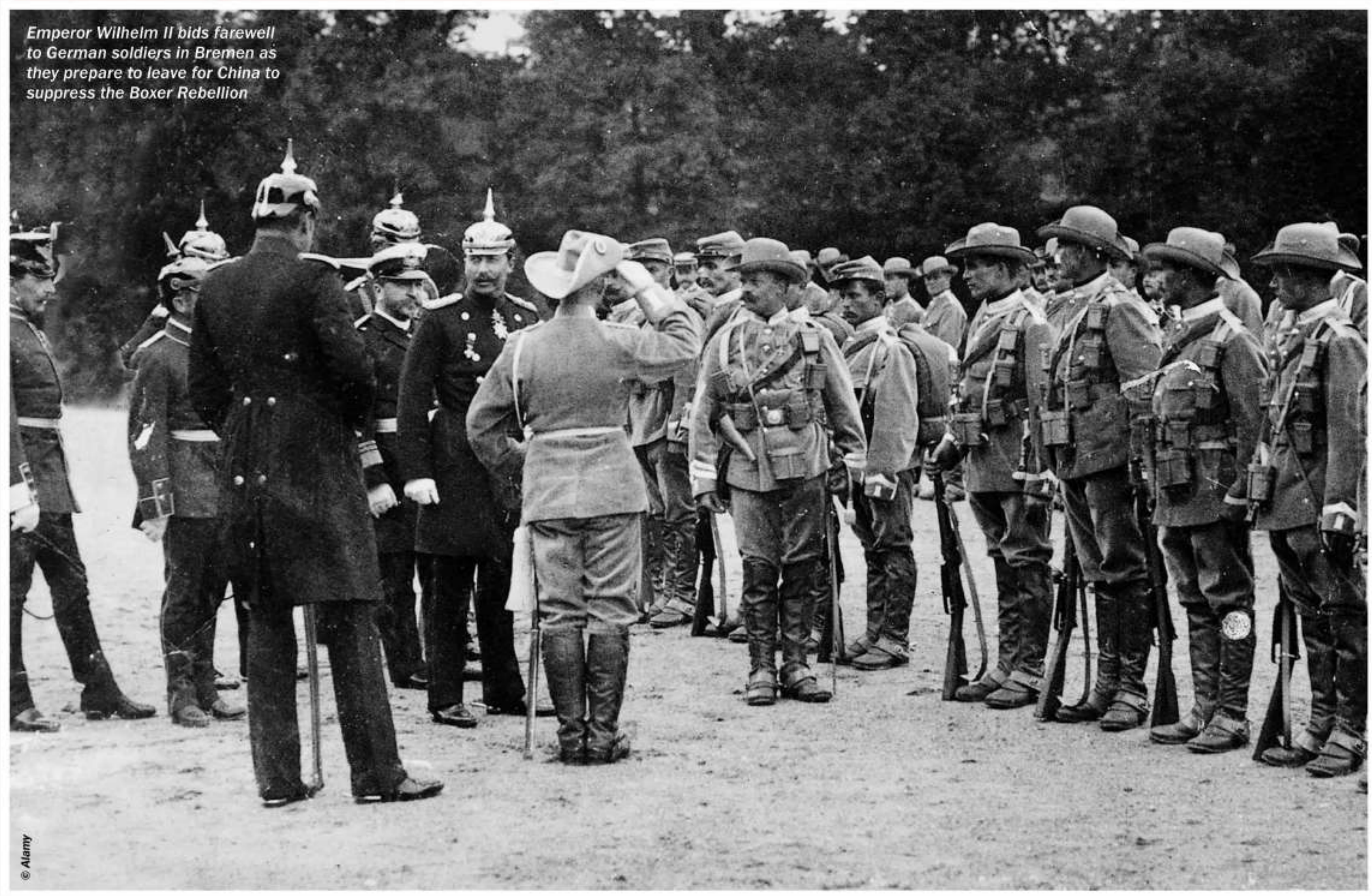
Author: Katja Hoyer **Publisher:** The History Press **Price:** £14.99

Katja Hoyer covers the 47 years from the unification of Germany in 1871 to the November Revolution of 1918 with impressive ease. Her well-illustrated book is based on considerable research and is always lively and readable. It offers a welcome reappraisal of the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, who dominated the fledgling German Empire between 1871 and 1888. Hoyer argues convincingly that it was not Bismarck's foreign policy that sowed the seeds of World War I, but rather the rash and impulsive 'New Course' followed by Kaiser Wilhelm II, from 1890, after engineering Bismarck's downfall.

Hoyer summarises complex issues with remarkable clarity and moves easily from the political, social and cultural issues affecting Germany to the larger international stage. Bismarck's careful diplomacy is contrasted with Wilhelm II's utter lack of tact, most notoriously in his 'Hun Speech' to soldiers being sent to suppress China's Boxer Rebellion in 1900, which enthusiastically likened them to an army of rampaging barbarians.

Hoyer also finds time for telling vignettes – particularly moving is the depiction of Peter Kollwitz, 18 in August 1914 and killed only ten days after enlisting, through the eyes of his grief-stricken mother, drawing upon her diary and art work.

Blood and Iron is an important and highly accessible survey of Germany's Second Reich. **MJ**



Emperor Wilhelm II bids farewell to German soldiers in Bremen as they prepare to leave for China to suppress the Boxer Rebellion

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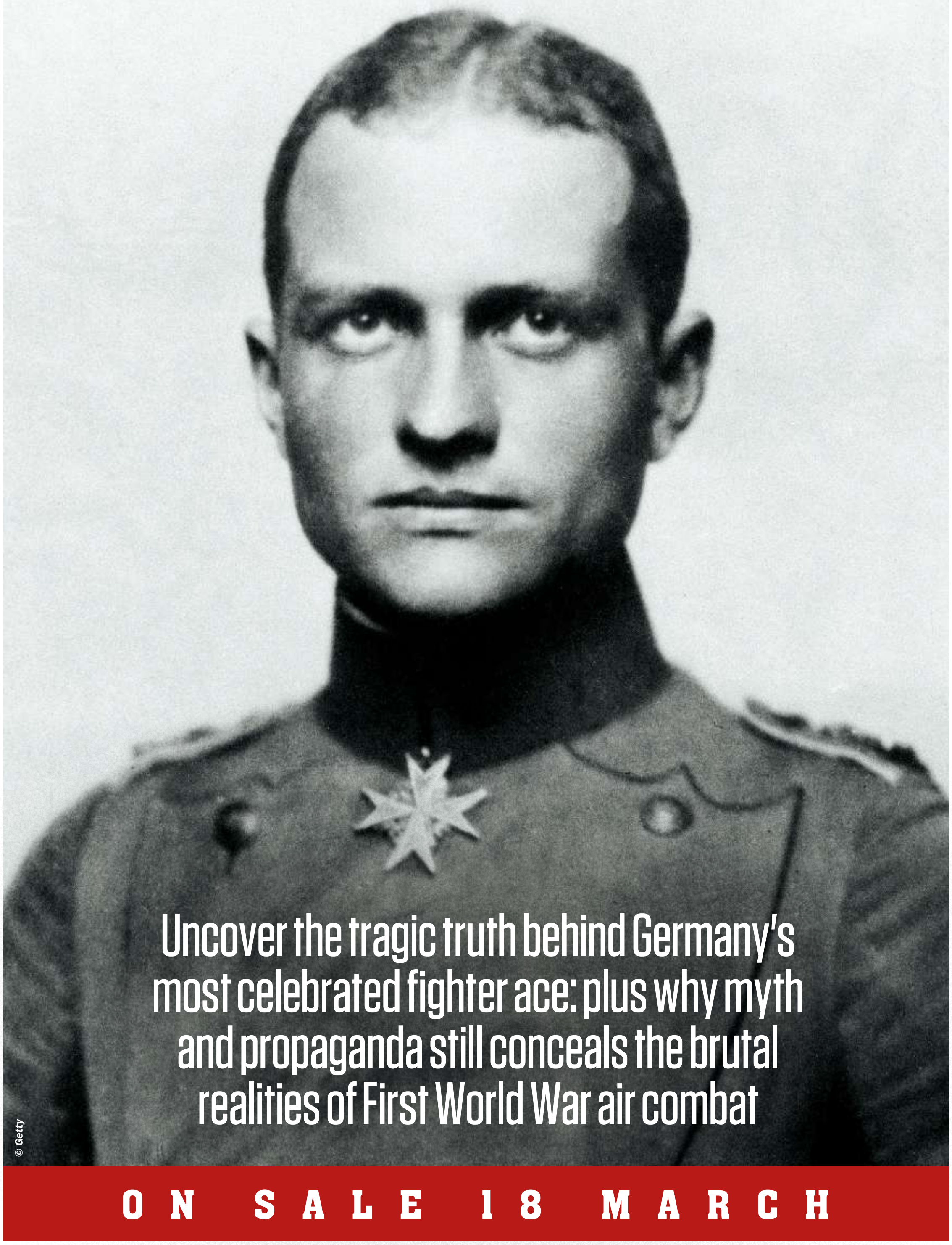

Uncover the tragic truth behind Germany's most celebrated fighter ace: plus why myth and propaganda still conceals the brutal realities of First World War air combat

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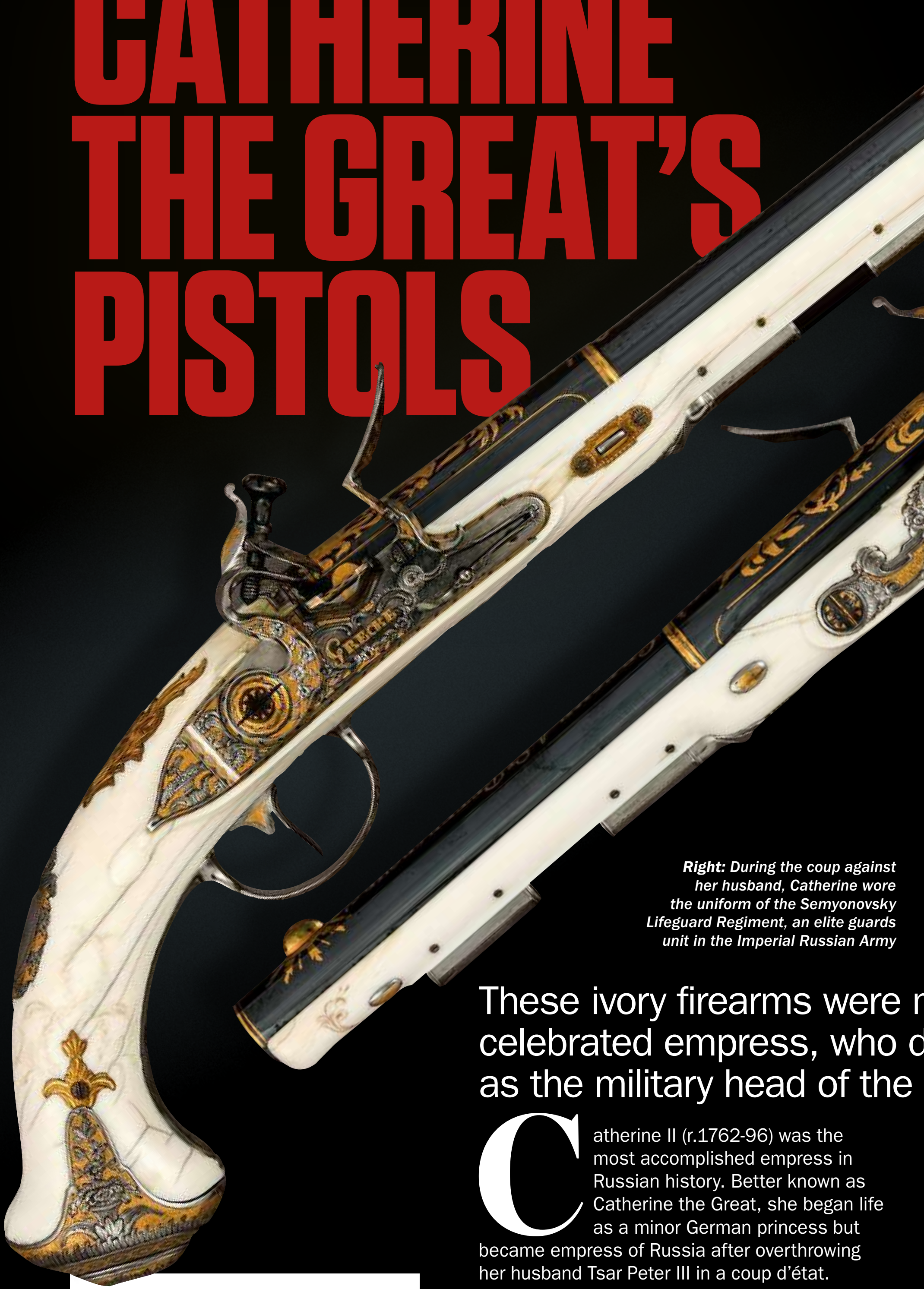
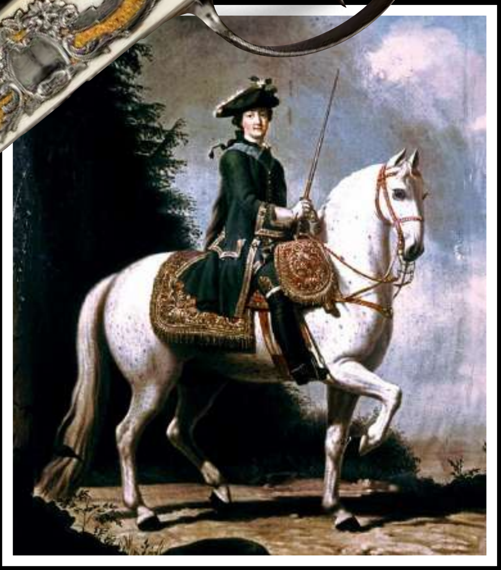
CATHERINE THE GREAT'S PISTOLS



The pistols were manufactured by the Saint Petersburg gunsmith Johan Adolph Grecke and are made of steel, gold and brass, as well as ivory



***Right:** During the coup against her husband, Catherine wore the uniform of the Semyonovsky Lifeguard Regiment, an elite guards unit in the Imperial Russian Army*

© Alamy

These ivory firearms were made for the celebrated empress, who delighted in her role as the military head of the Russian armed forces

Catherine II (r.1762-96) was the most accomplished empress in Russian history. Better known as Catherine the Great, she began life as a minor German princess but became empress of Russia after overthrowing her husband Tsar Peter III in a coup d'état. Catherine was subsequently fortunate to be assisted by talented generals and admirals, which resulted in many victories, such as the Russo-Turkish War (1768-74). During her reign, the empire grew by 520,000 square kilometres with new Russian territories including the Crimea, Belarus, Lithuania, Northern Caucasus, parts of Ukraine, Latvia and even Alaska. She also quelled internal risings, including Pugachev's Rebellion of Cossacks during 1773-75.

Although Catherine left campaigning to her commanders she had her own warrior spirit. She trained herself to use a sword when she was a child and even duelled with a female cousin before she left for Russia. As empress, she commissioned many uniforms for herself and participated in diverse military activities such as attending parades, exercises, inspecting fortifications and travelling with her fleet.

These pistols would therefore have been an ideal gift for Catherine. Manufactured in 1786, they are predominately made of ivory and have the initial 'E' (for 'Ekaterine') on the escutcheons of the grips. They were part of a decorative set of firearms that included a shotgun and rifle. Catherine eventually gave this set to her favourite Prince Stanisław August Poniatowski, who later became king of Poland. The irony of the pistols is that, despite their lavish decorations, they were no longer in vogue when they were produced. Ivory firearms were out of fashion in Western Europe by the later 18th century but they would have still been popular in the extravagant Russian court.

The pistols are part of the collections of the Department of Arms and Armor at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Known as 'The Met', the museum is the largest art museum in the United States and contains the popular Department of Arms and Armor.

THE MET

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